# HINDU NATIONALISM IN INDIA

TANIKA SARKAR

With an Introduction by Amrita Basu

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permanent black in association with ashoka UNIVERSITY

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To

STUDENTS

*who struggle for justice*

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# Preface

THE PRESENT COLLECTION of essays is based on research that I did over two decades on a theme whose salience waxes and wanes but never disappears. The articles came out of urgent political rather than scholarly compulsions, and, over time, opened up a persistent alternative site of investigations, quite different from my preferred field of historical writings.

In 1984 Uma Charavarty, who, along with Nandita Haksar, painstakingly revealed the political makings of the anti-Sikh massacres, gave me a copy of their memorable book, *Delhi Riots*. She wrote on the fly leaf: "Hoping that we never have to see this again." Words that have been tragically, terrifyingly, belied. Even though the targets of violence have shifted to Muslims, their majoritarian aspect remains in place: since 1984 – or even earlier, from the time of the 1983 Nellie massacres – we no longer have riots in this country, we have pogroms.

The present collection is not about violence but about the ideological underpinnings of violence. And not just the monstrous physical violence that is now a part of our everyday lives, but a systematic, structural violation of basic human and constitutional rights, environmental rights, the right to dissent and protest peacefully in public places, the rights of Muslims and Dalits to live in dignity and security – in fact, of their right to live at all. How have very large swathes of our people come to

accept, endorse, and engage in such acts? What produces the will to violence and violation, how has a common sense been achieved that normalises them? How has democracy come to be so widely translated as majoritarianism? The answers require a larger and deeper study of Indian democracy and nationalism. I have picked up only a single agent – the RSS. It has undoubtedly created much of this post-colonial predicament, but it has also relied on elements within larger structures of modern Indian habits of thinking.

This book also focuses on the organisational underpinnings of Hindutva. If the ideology of communal authoritarianism – or call it what you will – is thin and one-dimensional, that poverty is overcompensated by its organisational scope, spread, and intelligence, as well as by the sheer unremitting hard work of the extended cadre base, no matter whether the BJP is in or out of power. Hindutva's organisational apparatus is the oldest, the most continuous, and certainly the most multifarious political formation in the world devoted to the service of mobilising hatred.

I have always believed that electoral successes and failures are just the tip of the iceberg in our understanding of Hindutva. The unique resource of the BJP as an electoral party is that it enjoys not only a massive cadre base but an organisational support base that the RSS commands, which is almost as vast as India's Hindu society. It has penetrated deep – in recent times even into the political establishments of the West. I try, in these essays, to probe the points of strength that the RSS has mastered. I also try to explore the techniques that have helped them to do so. Many of its organisational activities and agents live in the shadows and we do not even know their names – scholarly and journalistic attention being so obsessively focused on the BJP. But the BJP by itself makes only limited sense. Narendra Modi

had been a RSS *pracharak* for a very large part of his life. And most of the illustrious political figures of the Hindutva combine have belonged to it as well.

The essays in this book were prodded into existence by changing conjunctures, so they may seem to make rather different points from time to time. I have not tried to change or edit them or even to fit them out with later and important readings and conceptual reflections, but have left them largely as they were when they first appeared to retain the flavour of the times from which they emerged. Some were written in a time of urgency and carry an urgent tone. The first article on the Rashtrasevikas was literally the first study of RSS women's organisations, though it has since been followed and overtaken by many others. It is quite different from the second one on the same theme, which was written a decade later. The article on Delhi schools, too, was the first to appear on the subject, as are the more recent ones on Hindutva's writing and teaching of history, and about the VHP's Hinduism. In between stands a piece on Hindutva's social thinking.

I must explain why the collection opens with an essay on Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*. I do not want to suggest that Bankimchandra was at all the true progenitor of the Hindutva spirit, though he is revered as an ancestor by the Sangh combine. He was far too erudite, cosmopolitan, and supple a thinker for that, and he wrote on many registers and themes that Hindutva either ignores or is scarcely aware of. *Anandamath* represents only one of his many facets and is not really a typical or representative instance of his oeuvre. Bankim was, however, disheartened by what he regarded as a historical lack of Hindu military success and tried to overcome and overturn it in an imagined history. I do point out that, in his very last

novel, *Sitaram*, he quite openly exposed the impossibility of that imagined Hindu nation. *Anandamath*, therefore, was a moment, a literary experiment that he tried out once and then abandoned. However, written as it was with his habitual brilliance, its anti-Muslim tirades and slogans easily captivated the subsequently communalised imagination, even as it captured a very different order of anti-colonial politics. I do not want even vaguely to suggest a clean-cut lineage for Hindutva beginning with Bankimchandra. But I do wish to show that this particular novel by him provided a powerful site for emergent communalised nationalism and gave it a coherent and resonant form.

A few of the essays grew out of the collective project that produced *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right* in 1993. I have learnt a great deal from extensive discussions with Sumit Sarkar, Ania Loomba, Pamela Philipose, Rajeev Bhargava, Zoya Hasan, Farida Khan, Amrita Basu, Raka Ray, and many other friends. I did a round of Delhi schools with Tapan Basu and discussed them with him over many days. Aditya Sarkar tried hard to make me a deeper thinker than I am, and failed. I recall, with great fondness and sadness, the stimulating daily discussions with my friend the late Praful Bidwai. Though my essays here show little of their influence, I have gained enormously from the superb works of Achin Vanaik, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot.

The responsibility for pushing me into publishing this collection lies entirely with Rukun Advani. He has edited the book with a meticulousness and care that I have rarely seen anywhere else.

# Introduction

AMRITA BASU

IT IS AN HONOUR to write about a book by one of the most influential and informative scholars of Indian history, and especially of Hindu nationalism. Like countless others, I have learned immensely from Tanika Sarkar's scholarship and am delighted that some of her seminal writings are being republished in this volume.

I begin my commentary by characterising Sarkar's approach, highlighting some of her distinctive contributions to the study of Hindu nationalist history and politics. I then discuss how this book informs our understanding of the changing trajectory of Hindu nationalism. Sarkar decided to republish these essays, largely in the form in which they initially appeared, to convey the flavour of the era in which she wrote them. As a result, we can trace changes in both the character of Hindu nationalism and in how she analysed it from 1991, when the first of the chapters in this volume was published, until 2020, when she wrote a new chapter for this book. One of the major contributions of this volume is the light it sheds both on the continuities and changes in Hindu nationalism that have enabled its steady rise.

## Field and Approach

A deeply interdisciplinary scholar, Sarkar's work defies easy categorisation. She's a social historian who provides a textured view of the fabric of community relations and the actions of "ordinary" people and everyday events. She's an ethnographer who discerns larger themes underlying personal interactions and insights. She's an intellectual historian who analyses literary and historical writings, and their interpretations and interpolations by contemporary political actors. She's a student of women's history who captures the complexities of women's identities, relations between private and public spheres, and the affective realm of politics. Sarkar reveals the interconnections among what are often discrete scholarly approaches. She demonstrates, for example, the material underpinnings of social relations. She refuses to cordon off women's history from the broader study of power.

This interdisciplinarity illuminates the multiple discourses and modalities of communication that Hindu nationalists employ. Sarkar is attentive to the different readerships and interpretive possibilities that novels, history books, lectures, and cassette recordings invite. She also calls attention to Hindu nationalists' affective modes of communication. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), she writes, not only insists that "Bande Mataram" is the authentic national anthem, it treats the song as a religious hymn that demands absolute and unquestioning obedience from devotees. They sing every word of it daily in their training centres on the premise that any alternation or abbreviation would constitute a mutilation of the sacred body of the motherland. In Chapter 2 she provides a riveting description of the impact of repeatedly hearing hour-long recordings of Sadhvi Rithambhara's cassette recordings. She describes Rithambhara's shrill, breath-

less, high pitched, passionate harangue that communicates to her audience the need to act urgently and violently to avenge supposed injustice.

Sarkar draws on social history, women's history, and intellectual history to develop several interdisciplinary themes. An important one concerns domestication, which she interprets in rich and varied ways. First, she domesticates her subject matter by making vivid and intelligible the organisations and people she studies. The tethering of nationalism to religion illuminates a second way she uses the concept of domestication. Sarkar argues that the greatest triumph of Hindu nationalists has been to blend *deshbhakti* (nation worship) and Rambhakti (worship of Lord Rama) so that the terms become interchangeable. By erasing the distinctions between nation and community, Hinduism and nationalism, and Muslims and foreigners, the RSS binds and transforms both religion and nationalism. It refashions what she describes as Hindu common sense by creating new ritual observances and codes of conduct, including:

> . . . sun worship twice a day; making the traditional auspicious Om symbol highly visible and ubiquitous in public places, among households, and on personal wear; daily worship of the central sacred text Gita for every Hindu household, and of the sacred tulsi plant; frequent pilgrimages and a domestic shrine in each home.

And finally, Sarkar shows that the political project of Hindu nationalism begins in the domestic sphere. A key to the regulation of Hindu social relations, she argues in Chapter 4, involves policing sexuality by prohibiting premarital love, marriage by choice and, most importantly, intercommunity love.

The RSS delegates to each Hindu family the responsibility for producing docile and submissive subjects who do not question

social hierarchies, cultivating powerful bonds of loyalty and duty among its members, and fostering fear and hatred towards those who are deemed outsiders:

> Inequality, like charity, begins at home, among different generations and between genders, and hegemonic social injunctions are taught at first in the intimate sphere, from which it is carried into a person's relationship with broader social and state injunctions. The family is also the primary unit from which imagined nations are conjugated – as communities of affect but also as communities that are forever endangered by others.

### History in the Hindu Nationalist Era

Keith Hopkinsall describes the need for historians to repeatedly rewrite history because we look to the past to understand ourselves in the present.[1] Hindu nationalists appreciate the political potential associated with understanding the present through their lens on the past. A brilliant and committed group of Indian historians have assumed the role of public intellectual to challenge Hindu nationalists' erroneous and dangerous interpretations of the past. Sarkar is at the forefront of these efforts. Her scholarship is reasoned, balanced, and empirically grounded, and her normative commitments are clear. She continually reminds her readers of the deadly consequences of the misreading of history the RSS promotes.

To uncover the fallacious claims of Hindu nationalists, Sarkar explores the misleading distinction they make between past and present. She points out that although Hindu nationalists continually rail against Western modernity, their understanding of

[1] https://www.historytoday.com/archive/what-social-history.

tradition is animated by modern political objectives. They depict themselves as contesting the alienating denationalising legacy of Macaulay by introducing a Hindu system of education (see Chapter 5). What this elides is the modern character of Hindu nationalist knowledge and history. Sarkar writes: "Hindu knowledge, of course, is a tradition that has necessarily to be invented in modern times and contexts since the very notion of a single homogenised Hindu is an ahistorical ideological construct." RSS history writing, she cogently observes, creates its own mythology.

Of particular relevance to Hindu nationalists' glorification of tradition are the roles they assign to women. They claim that submissive roles for women in the domestic sphere are in keeping with tradition. (See Chapters 3 and 4.) Challenging this view Sarkar argues, ". . . the new Hindu woman-citizen is cast in a mould which is very close to that to be found in bourgeois feminism. On specific questions of gender within Hinduism, the verdict seems to be unequivocally modernistic."

Sarkar shows that Hindu nationalists rely on the very structures of modern Western thought that they criticise. She argues that even Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya, in his hardline Hindu nationalist phase, was influenced by Utilitarianism and other Western philosophies. *Anandamath* employed modern prose and claimed territorial and historical imperatives to influence present and future politics.

One of the challenges for the historian is how to recognise the contemporary significance of history without flattening the past to make it fit the present. Sarkar does this with sensitivity and nuance. She is attuned to the multiple and conflicting themes in Bankimchandra's writing and rejects a reductive understanding of *Anandamath* as an anti-colonial tract. In Chapter 1, she argues that Bankimchandra depicts a nation that was unimaginable at

the time but gave rise to the politics of the present. However, she also shows how Bankimchandra visualised a nation that inspired current Hindu nationalists. "I do not want even vaguely to suggest a clean-cut lineage for Hindutva beginning with Bankimchandra. But I do wish to show that this particular novel by him provided a powerful site for emergent communalised nationalism and gave it a coherent and resonant form."

The central theme runs that through RSS history is that Hindus are victims of predatory and rapacious Muslims and must engage in violence to defend themselves. It takes the form of stories drawn from a variety of literary and historical texts, spanning the medieval period, Partition, and the current era, all of which justify Hindu violence against Muslims. These stories not only normalise violence against Muslims but also perpetuate Brahmanical Hindu domination and regulate and control women's sexuality.

Hindu nationalists' ability to popularise a distorted view of history speaks in part, Sarkar argues, to the authority the RSS commands. It also speaks to the failure of the most respected and authoritative approaches to the study of Indian history. For all their important contributions, Sarkar argues, post-modernists have been excessively preoccupied with cultural analysis devoid of an appreciation of its material and political underpinnings. She also argues that by questioning historical certainties and objectivity, post-modernists have inadvertently created space for cultural relativism:

> RSS history is driven by political needs, popular beliefs and myths, and constructed memory. Collectively, these assert privilege against investigative history, claiming that "your history" comes in the way of "my memory" and relativising all narratives so that the question of academic evaluation and cross-checking, of ascertaining the validity of narrative claims, methods, and purposes does not arise.

> History becomes a flat field where all kinds of memories have an equally interesting status.

Although, Sarkar argues, Left-secular historians avoid these pitfalls, they err in another direction, of depicting history as a combat between the forces of good and evil, in which the heroes are secular-nationalist leaders and the villains are the colonisers. The Hindu Right has retained these binaries but replaced the heroes with Hindus and the villains with Muslims.

Perhaps an even more serious weakness of post-modernists and leftists is that their audience is confined to educated, middle-class academics in metropolitan centres. By contrast, the RSS has undertaken the massive task of producing and disseminating history to a far larger audience.

A major focus of Sarkar's scholarship (especially in Chapter 5) is the importance that the RSS attributes to making and teaching history, and to education more broadly. The Hindu nationalist educational offensive has taken many forms. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led governments have replaced NCERT textbooks with their own factually flawed accounts informed by the writings of RSS leaders V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar. They have placed their members in leadership positions of major research institutions and universities. Most importantly, Hindu nationalists have created one of the largest chains of schools in the country to provide its base, the petit bourgeoisie, with greater confidence *vis-à-vis* upper-middle-class English-educated students. These schools cultivate in students from their early childhood pride in their Hindu identities and conflate their Hindu and national identities. Not surprisingly, she notes, the RSS describes its educational institutions as mandirs (Hindu temples) rather than as schools and ensures that there is a temple on or near school premises.

## What Explains the Strength of the Hindu Right?

The essays in this volume, written at different periods of time, when read together, ask what explains the extraordinary strength and longevity of the Sangh Parivar. What has enabled the RSS to withstand major changes in the Indian polity and political economy since its creation in the 1920s. Two features stand out: first, its organisational strength, which is reflected in its vertical reach, from local communities to the national state, and the different services it provides and the work it does among children, students, women, and virtually every other group. The second source of its strength lies in its steadfast ideological commitment to Hindu domination and Muslim subjugation.

Sarkar recounts the history of the Hindu Right by placing the views of its major ideologues against the backdrop of the political context of pre- and post-colonial India. She argues that V.D. Savarkar created an enduring ideological framework which characterised India as the homeland of Hindus and depicted non-Hindus as outsiders. She notes his silences and deep anxieties about class and caste inequalities, which belied his claims about Hindu unity.

RSS founder Dr Hedgewar translated these ideas into a set of organisational structures by creating shakhas (daily training centres) which recruited urban-educated upper-caste men trained in local vernacular-medium institutions in non-metropolitan sites, who viewed both metropolitan elites and Muslims with suspicion and distrust. Influenced by conservative Brahmanical values, they also feared and opposed the aspirations of women and the lower castes.

The horrific violence surrounding Partition strengthened support for the RSS claim that the differences between Hindus

and Muslims were fundamental and irreconcilable. However, the post-independence period confronted the Sangh with new challenges. For the first time, universal adult franchise and representative democracy empowered the poor, women, and lower castes.

The RSS, under the leadership of M.S. Golwalkar, pushed back. Writing in the late 1940s, Golwalkar called for replacing parliamentary democracy with electing representatives exclusively from "respectable professionals", namely upper-caste and upper-class men, and demanded an amendment of the constitution to limit social rights. Sarkar notes that the first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government that the BJP formed (1999–2004), in keeping with Golwalkar's views, established a commission to suggest amendments to the constitution.

However, the Sangh Parivar could not afford to simply repudiate democracy and claim it was alien to India because a commitment to formal social equality had become deeply ingrained in the public sphere. Political challenges to the Sangh Parivar's vision grew in the 1970s and 1980s amidst the growth of Dalit movements challenging upper-caste domination and secessionist movements challenging Indian unity. Another turning point was the early 1990s, when the United Front government headed by V.P. Singh further threatened to undermine the BJP's social base by extending reservations in public education and employment to the so-called Other Backward Castes.

The Sangh Parivar responded by expanding its social base to incorporate the lower castes. It appointed prominent lower-caste leaders, adopted rural schemes that addressed the interests of tribals and Dalits, and mobilised the lower castes to participate in riots. Recognising the need to expand its social base to achieve electoral power, the BJP formed regional and national alliances with low-caste parties. This meant, Sarkar argues in Chapter 3, that the Sangh Parivar had to create a new division of labour

among its constituents in the late 1990s. While the BJP sought to demonstrate its inclusiveness through alliances and coalitions, other branches of the Sangh Parivar demonstrated renewed commitment to Hindu nationalist ideals.

Sarkar devotes particular attention to the changing strategies of the Sangh Parivar towards women, from the early to the late 1990s. In 1991, when Sarkar first published Chapter 2, "The Woman as Communal Subject", Hindu nationalists were engaging in massive movement-style mobilisation; the BJP's role was secondary and subordinate to that of the RSS and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP).

The RSS and VHP accorded key activist roles to women in the campaign that culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992. Sarkar comments that, in promoting women's public participation, the RSS-affiliated Samiti had come a long way since its early days under Golwalkar's leadership, when it treated women as symbols of cultural purity in the domestic sphere. While recognising that the Samiti was not promoting full-blown women's emancipation, Sarkar argued that it was empowering a segment of Hindu middle-class women and enabling them to play leadership roles in the public sphere.

By 1999, when Sarkar first published "Pragmatics of the Hindu Right" (Chapter 3), she discerned a significant change in the character of the Sangh Parivar's women's organisations. In the year after the BJP attained power, the membership of the Delhi Samiti was halved. She attributes the Sangh's decision to demonstrate its commitment to cultural authenticity by withdrawing women from the public sphere. Reflecting back on her earlier work on Samiti women she writes, "I had hesitated to use the word 'fundamentalism' in the early 1990s, either about the Sangh's gender ideology or about its women's organisations.

I am convinced that the fundamentalist turn is now accomplished."

She concludes that as long as the BJP remains committed to electoral success, the Sangh will represent itself as the guarantor of core cultural values and make Hindu women exemplars of domesticity.

By the 2010s, the Sangh Parivar had combined what seemed to be antithetical goals of encouraging activist roles for Hindu women in order to reinforce their traditional gender identities. In "Love in the Time of Hindutva", which was first published in 2018 (Chapter 4), Sarkar describes a "Women from India Against Love Jihad" brigade that Hindutva women formed to enforce sanctions against inter-community romantic relations, on the pretext that Muslim men were coercing Hindu women into romantic relationships, converting them to Islam, and abusing them. It did not matter if a Hindu woman said that she freely decided to become involved with a Muslim man. She was presumed to be a victim and gullible; and Muslim men were presumed to be treacherous predators. Sarkar argues that the campaign draws on the Sangh Parivar's views of Hindu women as innocent, helpless, and therefore incapable of differentiating between "genuine and fraudulent or malevolent love."

In "Problems of Social Power in the Discourses of the Hindu Right" (Chapter 6), which was first published in 2005, Sarkar addresses another challenge the Sangh Parivar confronted. Although from its early years it championed economic nationalism, it was confronted in the 1990s by dramatic changes in the Indian political economy. With economic liberalisation, Indian elites were increasingly integrated into global capitalist circuits and Congress-led United Front governments were championing their interests. To gain the support of Indian business groups and

to retain the backing of powerful diasporic communities, the BJP began to support economic reform. The Vajpayee-led NDA government (1999–2004) eased restrictions on foreign investments, sold off profitable public-sector industries, and reduced farmers' subsidies and workers' protections. However, it lost the 2004 elections because the Congress Party was more successful in combining support for neoliberalism with proclaimed commitments to social welfare.

This volume does not address the factors that resulted in resounding victories for the BJP in the 2014 and, by an even greater margin, in 2019. However, Sarkar invites us to examine the most recent phase of Hindu nationalism through the questions she raises. On the issue of economic policy, I would contend that one of the major reasons for the BJP's victory in 2014, alongside Modi's popularity, was his promise to increase growth rates and provide more jobs. Modi campaigned on a centre-right platform seeking "maximum governance, minimum government". He gained the backing of major corporate leaders, who considered his administrative skills essential to reviving industrial growth. In 2014, the BJP's economic platform was quite consistent with the one that Sarkar describes in 2004.

The puzzle is why the BJP was re-elected to office by an even larger margin in 2019 despite its failure to achieve economic growth and create new jobs. Growth rates were falling, even according to the government's own estimates. I suggest two explanations. First, during its first term in office, it combined pro-business and pro-market policies (new bankruptcy laws, reform of indirect taxes) with populist schemes (sanitation facilities, farmers' loan waivers, gas connections, affordable housing, and bank accounts for the poor). It thereby retained the support of the middle classes while gaining increased support from the

rural poor. Thus, there was a reversal in the roles of Congress and the BJP governments. Whereas in the past, Congress had promised some social-welfare provisions, it failed to deliver on these commitments during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's second term in office (2009–2014). The BJP filled the vacuum through a combination of neoliberal and populist approaches.

Second, the BJP's commitments to religious nationalism deepened during its first term in office and became a major source of its electoral victory in 2019. In contrast to the 2014 election campaign, in which the BJP emphasised economic issues, its 2019 election campaign was xenophobic and anti-minority. It repeatedly provoked fears about illegal migration and threats to national security by terrorist groups in Pakistan. The government's decision to launch air strikes against Pakistan in response to a terrorist attack that killed Indian soldiers in Jammu and Kashmir in February 2019 played a major role in the BJP's election. In this and other instances, the BJP has spoken not merely of a threat to Hindu identity but also of a threat to Indian identity. It has thereby conflated all opposition to the current government's policies as being anti-Indian and anti-Hindu.

Under the current regime, the organisational strength of the RSS and its ties to the ruling party are stronger than ever. As a result, the boundaries between public and private spheres have further eroded. Rumours of cow slaughter and love jihad have led government officials and the Hindu Right to engage in increased surveillance of the private sphere to police what people are eating and who they are marrying.

The policies the government has pursued since its re-election in 2019 evoke Savarkar who, Sarkar observes, created an enduring ideological framework which characterised India as the homeland

of Hindus and depicted non-Hindus as outsiders. "Geography and faith," she writes in a remarkably prescient sentence, "were conjoined to lay the basis for Hindutva's concept of citizenship." Consider the relevance of this observation. In 2019, the government revoked Article 370 of the constitution which had for over seventy years allowed Jammu and Kashmir to form its own state legislature and create its own laws. In order to encourage non-Kashmiris, primarily Hindus, to purchase land and settle in the region, it also revoked Article 35-A which protected Kashmiris' rights to land ownership and permanent residence. It published an updated version of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for Assam, which excluded approximately two million people, mostly Muslims, who have lived in India for decades. Those who are unable to produce documentation of citizenship before Foreigners Tribunals (which is impossible for many displaced and impoverished people) are sent to government detention centres where the conditions are deplorable.

Within months of its re-election, the Indian parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which provides undocumented immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan an accelerated path to citizenship – unless they are Muslims. The act further reduces the period of time required for naturalisation for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian immigrants who arrived in India before December 2014 from Muslim-majority neighbouring countries. There is clearly a link between the CAA and the government's actions in Assam. The CAA enables tens of thousands of Bengali Hindu migrants in Assam who were excluded from the NRC to become citizens. The cabinet also approved funding for a National Population Register which will include a question about parents' birthplaces, suggesting that people whose citizenship the government questions will

have to establish their Indian lineage. It empowers government functionaries to profile Muslims and requires that Muslims – and only Muslims – provide documentation of their citizenship.

Through the lens of a historian charting the connections between the past and present and seeking to understand popular cultural appeals, Sarkar notes in the final chapter of this volume that growing numbers of Hindus interpret the world through the prism of religious nationalism:

> Hindutva's religious manoeuvres have not received the attention they deserve. Important though the mantra of development has been, the RSS claim to represent and protect both Hindu community and Hindu nation has had an equally powerful and even more enduring grip over popular emotion, before and after 2014. It is quite clear that this conviction is not going to disappear in the near future.

Sarkar shines a light on how the Sangh Parivar emerged from the margins of political life to become the hegemonic force it is today by tethering religion to nationalism, reshaping the Hindu common sense, harnessing popular passions, and reinventing Indian history. Read this book – to appreciate why we should accord these developments the attention they deserve.

# 1

# The Birth of a Goddess

## Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's *Anandamath*

HISTORIANS NOWADAYS approach literary texts as neither fully beyond nor entirely subordinated to the compulsions of history, but as historical events in themselves: as created by, and as themselves creating, new textual and non-textual histories. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's celebrated and controversial novel, *Anandamath* (hereafter *AM*), illustrates this as no other Bengali literary creation does.[1] The novel came as something of an annunciation, not only of a momentous literary event but even of the idea of a Hindu nation

[1] For an excellent English translation, with a critical introduction, of this novel, see Julius Lipner, *Anandamath, or, The Sacred Brotherhood*, Delhi, 2006. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (1838–94) was the creator of the Bengali novel, as well as a master of polemical essays, satirical skits, and serious discursive writings on social and religious themes. As the founder-editor of *Bangadarshan*, he also initiated literary journalism. On account of his innovations he was also one of the most influential makers of modern Bengali prose. In his professional life, he was a senior government official. For a recent biography, see Amitrasudan Bhattacharya, *Bankimchandrajibani*, Calcutta, 1991.

and a new Hindu goddess.[2] At the same time, it provided an account of Hindu–Muslim relationships from which both goddess and nation drew their energies. This new novelistic vision was destined to govern diverse and conflicted political imaginaries for years to come. Its power – though not unchallenged – remains undimmed even today.

The goddess was produced and publicised through entirely modern means: prose. Prose had never earlier been deployed as the medium for sacred literature. Now, the novel, the medium of print, and the market for literature were being used in the service of a goddess. All such novelties notwithstanding, the new deity slid smoothly into the Hindu theogony as an always-already-there, a given. Soon she spawned, in different parts of the country, songs, poetry, drama, many different idols and temples, and acquired a secure place in the Hindu devotional imaginary as well as in the Indian political imagination. When, in the next century, a young nationalist leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, suggested to North Indian peasants that it was they who constituted the Motherland, the peasants were astonished and disbelieving. No, they said, the Motherland was a goddess. They knew what she looked like.

I do not claim that this novel was the first literary endeavour to imagine and produce a new goddess: many myths do that. Bengali verse narratives from late medieval times had invented minor goddesses, appropriated from low-caste or tribal pantheons,

[2] In the previous decade, a number of leading Bengali intellectuals had, indeed, tried to create cultural products and processes that would be named Hindu and National, often interchangeably. Bankim, however, provided a compelling icon which unified the two concepts within a single vision. He also added a new imperative: both Hindu and Nation were imagined through acts of opposition to the Muslim.

and incorporated them into a brahmanic divine hierarchy in order to compose a more integrative mythic order. They had also spelt out new ritual regimes, appropriate for their worship. I will therefore try and show what precisely was new and modern about *AM*. I specify three new elements within it: a spatial or territorial imperative; a historical-temporal imperative; and a political message whose resonance, located in the past, was meant to influence present and future politics.

The interlock of the divine, the national, and the communal flowed from an exchange between sacred and profane realms and purposes. In the Preface to the first edition, Bankim had written that the novel was meant to show that "there is a link between the heavens and this world."[3] The link between the earthly and the divine is in fact more pronounced in *AM* than in any of Bankim's other novels. It goes beyond the dreams, visions, and trances through which the sacred sometimes bursts into the profane in some of his other works.[4] On such occasions in his other work the miraculous disclosure of the sacred enables some twists and turns in the unfolding of a plot that, nonetheless, revolves around earthly happenings. The miraculous or the magical simply propel human romances or tragedies in particular directions. In *AM*, in contrast, an embodied sacred presence is the dominant image around which all novelistic action happens.

In a sense *AM*, too, did not break entirely from Bankim's earlier deployment of the sacred-magical, inasmuch as it did not

[3] *AM*, p. 595. All translations are mine. The Bengali text of *AM* referred to throughout is in *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 1, ed. Jogeschandra Bagal, Calcutta, 1953.

[4] See, for instance, his *Bishabriksha* (1873), *Chandrashekhar* (1875), and *Krishnakanter Will* (1878), among others. In all these, supernatural presences speak or dreams foretell the future. See Jogeschandra Bagal, ed., *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 1, Calcutta, 1953.

move about in the realm of gods; nor, for that matter, had the earlier Bengali sacred narratives dedicated to new goddesses. Such works mostly imagined a timeless world of kings, merchants, and hunters within which gods and goddesses flitted in and out, trying to compete with one another over human devotion. But the difference is that *AM*, in contrast, is positioned within a very precisely delineated and purposeful historical moment. The goddess could not have appeared as she did, or done what she does in the novel, at any other time. This imperative of history-laden time makes Bankim's novel a very different and unconventional form of the goddess myth. It detaches the goddess from the realm of eternal divine sport, and from her search for power and glory in the human realm in the manner characteristic of earlier myths. It locates her purpose and function in a political desire that belongs to a specific and modern history.

The historical compulsion inscribed a different order of politics into the novelistic mythology. In a sense, earlier cultic texts had also prescribed an ideal behaviour that served ideological purposes. Goddesses demanded blind obedience from devotees, a suspension of their sense of right and wrong, in order to teach them the meaning of the most absolute form of power – which belongs to the divines alone. The lesson shored up, through a transmission belt, the power of mortals over mortals: of kings, Brahmans, husbands. It underpinned the politics of caste, gender, and monarchy. But the lesson that the goddess intends to teach in *AM* is historically specific: how Hindus should acquire and exercise power over Muslims.

The novel describes and reveals a new goddess in a temple. It also redescribes a known land as the body of the goddess. This territorial function is an entirely new element and sets up some curious twists in conventional mythic and devotional patterns. All cultic myths establish a hierophany which turns a natural,

physical space into a sacred one. The sacred enters the world through specific spaces; the world derives sanctity from them. The space of the world is thus discontinuous: it contains certain designated areas through which the sacred enters and suffuses the profane. Such entry points must be marked off from the rest of the world, they stand in opposition to it.[5]

*AM*, in contrast, proposes two very different things simultaneously. It suggests two spaces of discontinuity where the sacred is made evident. The first, described in the Preface and the Conclusion, is a deep, primeval forest, silent and dark as the eternal darkness on the eve of creation. There the Voice Divine is heard, in conversation with the Great Man, explaining the divine purpose. It is the prophetic moment, constructed as a vision or as hyperreality. A species of modernism is, however, introduced in the Conclusion, when the defeated prophet refuses to accept the justice of the divine command.

The second space is more conventional: it is revealed when the sacred warriors within the novel take the new recruit, Mahendra, to a temple, and disclose a new divine form to him. The forest of the Preface and the Conclusion, distinct from the more mundane forest where much of the novel unfolds, is not accessible to ordinary mortals. The Great Man alone enters it. It is the relative accessibility of the temple and the images that make the land holy. However, the precise identification of specific sacred spaces where the divine is made manifest is cancelled out by the fact that the entire space of the Motherland, the territory of the country, is simultaneously considered sacred in its full continuity. The very fulness of its continuous spatial sacredness negates the

[5] On this, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York, 1959.

discontinuity between sacred and profane spaces which is normally required for the establishment of a sacred centre, of the exact space from within which the sacred comes to suffuse the profane.

In the Introduction, an unearthly voice in a deep and silent forest speaks to the Great Man about an impending collective sacrifice. At first, we are unsure about the nature of this sacrifice. It seems to be an altogether mystical, non-mundane experience. Much later into the novel, however, we realise that it refers to an actual historical event – the Sanyasi-Fakir rebellion of the early 1770s. At the end of the novel, the leader of armed Hindu ascetics faces a sacred form that reveals the purpose of the great war that has just been concluded. There are also dreams and visions of the sacred where the goddess speaks to other divine beings.[6] With such ingredients from the sacred world, the novel composes a new divine project as well as a politics of Hindu nationhood. It brings the two together by displaying the exchanges between the sacred and the profane.

Benedict Anderson has famously suggested a structural connection between the modern novel and the imagined nation.[7] I find a somewhat different kind of connection at work in *AM*. The novel, at first glance, is constative, or descriptive. It seems to portray a historical situation. It turns out, however, to be more of a performative speech act that causes the deed that it names: in this case, the foundation of a Hindu nation, or of a Hindu political will that must realise the nation. *AM* describes a nation that was non-imagined and unimaginable in the time of

[6] *AM*, p. 715.

[7] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1983.

the novel, and in the time that the novel describes.[8] It was still unimagined in quite that form even at the time of Bankim's writing. Through the elaboration of an imaginary, then, it brought forth a politics of the present.

Predictably, an endeavour that attempted and accomplished so much yielded highly diverse readings and political meanings. Gandhian nationalists as well as revolutionary terrorists, Muslim Congressmen and colonial rulers, Hindu militants and Muslim League politicians, Leftists and Rightists, have conjugated their own various understandings from different elements in the novel, or from varied interpretations of the same words, images, and events. Even though this plurality is conventionally seen as a product of misreadings from some vantage point or the other, I would want to argue that the plurality of readings has an organic or necessary connection with the texture of the novel. With deliberation and deftness, Bankim layered ambiguity with uncertainty; he destabilised and problematised what seem to be certainties and explicit messages within the text. The subsequent course of the novel added to the multitude of ways in which it was read. It went through several editions and corrections: Bankim added confusing and mysterious explanations and addenda. He also moved on from the novel to other representations of similar themes with quite different conclusions.[9]

I will try to identify some of the significant readings and uses of the text, and relate them to certain motifs within the novel, showing the mutual accommodation between contradictory readings and ambiguous narrative movements. Even if it sounds naïve, I

[8] J.L. Austin's ideas on speech and the function of words are illuminating in this context. See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Boston, 1962.

[9] For the changes and alterations in various editions, see Aparna Bhattacharya, *Bankim Upanyasher Mool Roop O Roopantar*, Calcutta, 1999.

disclaim any intention of disclosing the "real truth" of the novel. In recent times, in yet another controversy over the novel in the pages of a leading Bengali daily, I have been accused of doing precisely that – of claiming to identify the true Bankim, as well as of giving my own meanings to the narrative.[10] It seems that, in some quarters, it is still considered illegitimate to look behind the written words and derive one's own sense of them in terms that are not explicitly given in the text itself. The text is taken in such quarters to be fully identical with authorial intention, as an entirely transparent and stable text which resists meanings that accrue from different readers and contexts of readings.[11] It is fair to mention here that there is no exact equivalent for the term "interpretation" in Bengali or in Sanskrit literary and exegetical discussions. The nearest terms refer to an amplification of the meaning that has already been given or stated very explicitly in the text: *vyakhya* or *bhava samprasaran*, for instance. The interpretive act, then, may justly seem to be doing violence to the author and the text. At the same time, modern times in our country did throw up acts of interpretation, developing methods that were not derived from Western sources. Bankimchandra, in his literary journal *Bangadarshan*, pioneered some of the critical moves in this respect.

## II

Let me begin with the historical situation from which the novel is derived, though it was by no means determined by it. *AM*

[10] For a critical response to my observations on *AM* and my counter-responses, see *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 13 April, 4 May, and 12 May 2005.

[11] A classic work in Western literary theory on the critical limitations of seeking out authorial intention in texts is W.K. Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy", in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, Lexington, 1954.

deals with a transitional moment in the late eighteenth century in Bengal. The East India Company was then calling the shots from behind the façade of a puppet Muslim nawab. It rack-rented peasant surplus to augment revenues, from which the Company extracted a massive tribute. The drive was so relentless that three successive droughts produced a famine of catastrophic proportions in 1770. Much of the land returned to waste and approximately one-third of the population starved to death. Robbers roamed the highways, and villagers swelled their ranks. Sometimes, armed mendicants – Hindu sanyasis and Muslim fakirs – provided the leadership and organisation. Their risings against the nawab's forces, which now were assisted by the East India Company's troops, finally forced the British to shift to a system of more direct controls over Bengal's revenues, law, and administration. Eventually, Warren Hastings sent in troops which quelled the rebellions, the nawab was deposed, and the East India Company assumed direct administrative control.[12] A colonial revenue policy was systematised, granting total powers over cultivating tenants to parasitic landlords in exchange for a fixed but substantial revenue that the landlord would pay to the state. The landlord was free to raise the rent or evict tenants if they failed to meet his demands. Bankim had written eloquently about the tenant's vulnerability under the new colonial regulations in some of his earlier essays.[13]

*AM* alters the known historical narrative, already familiar to the intelligentsia by the time the novel was written. It holds the puppet nawab entirely responsible for the famine, thereby exempting the Company from all blame, save that of throwing

[12] See N.K. Sinha, ed., *The History of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1967.

[13] "Bangadesher Krishak", in *Vividha Prabandha*, pt 2, *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 2.

its weight behind the nawab. Moreover, it holds the nawab responsible not just for widespread dearth and starvation, but also for a deliberate and total destruction of Hindus – of their honour, faith, caste, and women. In other words, it forces a split between the agents and victims of the famine: the agents are Muslims, whereas the starving and dying people are always identified as Hindus, notwithstanding references to Muslim villagers who would equally have been victims of the catastrophe. This split represents a remarkable departure from Bankim's essays written earlier than the novel. The eponymous peasant, whose distress under colonial governance he had evoked in the previous decade, was either called Rama Kaivarta, denoting a low-caste Hindu, or Rahim Sheikh, a Muslim.[14] Agrarian distress was then represented as an effect of class, not communal, relations. The heroes of *AM*, however, consistently describe the famine as the special misfortune of Hindus inflicted upon them by Muslims: "Where else have you seen a land where your money is not safe in the box, the sacred idol is not safe in the shrine, the unborn foetus is not safe in the mother's womb . . . they slash the wombs to expel forth the child . . . Our faith is ruined, our caste and honour are gone, now even our lives are in danger . . . unless we drive out these drunken Muslim wretches, how can we save the religion of Hindus?"[15] The Muslim ruler, an individual, is expanded for ideological purposes into an entire community.

The novel departs in other ways from known historical chronicles. It eliminates the role of Muslim fakirs in the rebellious risings, and it ascribes a patriotic purity of aspiration to armed Hindu ascetics, a virtue which the marauders seem not

[14] "Bangadesher Krishak". See also "Samya", ibid.

[15] *AM*, p. 727.

to have actually possessed. Finally, it frames the events within an overarching agenda of Hindu nationhood: an idea that would not have existed even in prototype in the late eighteenth century. In other words, while the historical time of famines and clashes is continued in the narrative, the heroes of the novel – the Santans (meaning children; in this case, of the goddess of the Motherland) – are not reliable as historical reconstructions.

The famine may have been the immediate pretext of violence, but the Santans in the novel make it perfectly clear that the full agenda is neither conditioned nor caused by it. Their project is the elimination of Muslims. As Satyananda, the great ascetic leader of the Hindus, puts it: "We do not want power for ourselves. We want to exterminate all the Muslims on this land as they are enemies of God."[16] And: "Many had resented the end of Hindu power and Hindus have been eager to see a restoration of their faith."[17] So, there is a continuous inflation of meaning: from a resentment at the alleged responsibility of the Muslim ruler for the famine, to the construction of a "history" of unvarying Muslim tyranny, to a defence of faith and of God Himself from His enemies. If the famine is the originary and immediate justification for a war against Muslims, it soon recedes from that causative status. War becomes a categorical imperative, independent of the famine.

In the Preface to his next novel, *Debi Choudhurani*, Bankim would write that he had not intended *AM* to be a fully historical novel.[18] We need to reflect on why he broke free of the discipline of historical evidence in this particular novel, because elsewhere he announces his fidelity to it often enough. This also suggests the

[16] Ibid., p. 750.

[17] Ibid., p. 757.

[18] Bagal, Introduction, *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 1.

need to think about the other ways in which this novel stands out from his earlier fiction on a similar theme. Bankim had already used historical narratives of Hindu resistance against Muslim rule in his previous novel, *Rajsingha*, in which Hindu kings and princesses are united against Aurangzeb.[19] The compulsions and ideals that Bankim ascribed to the making of that war, however, were now no longer sufficient. Now he needed to imagine a different and more deliberately holy war: not for the realm of a particular Hindu monarch and fought for by royal armies, but a war without the imperatives of power and self-interest, fought by ascetics who ally with ordinary Hindus, even to the extent of forgoing the divisions of caste while the war lasts.

The elimination of power and self-interest also allows the entry and the sovereignty of a new commitment: pure patriotism, inspired by devotion to a particular deity, the Motherland. In his earlier historical novels, a free Hindu realm had certainly been an important ideal that activated Hindu heroes in their wars against Muslims. But that realm had denoted the rule of a Hindu dynasty. The goddess of the Motherland, by contrast, is not a deity that requires such an ideal. So, even if *Rajsingha* had displayed the theme of Hindu heroism against a Muslim sovereign, it had not allowed for patriotic bhakti or devotionalism, nor for the leadership of disinterested, selfless ascetics, nor for the active role of ordinary villagers. It is from this new conjunction of forces – selfless purity, populism, and faith – that the new Hindu nation emerges in the revised nationalism of *AM*. The nation in this novel is meant to represent the entire Hindu people, including low castes and peasants, albeit in differentiated capacities and firmly under the direction of brahmanical

[19] *Rajsingha*, 1882, ibid.

authorities. The Hindu nation's representative and hierarchically inclusive capacity in *AM* is a modern imperative.

There was a problem, however: if history was of little help for the new imaginary, the present that Bankim lived in was not a conducive resource either. Bankim was very critical – indeed, mocking – of the politics of associations and petitions that educated middle-class politicians had formed: he found them lacking in heroic, masculine qualities. The more militant nationalist politics of violence and self-sacrifice, such as became manifest later in revolutionary terrorism, did not exist in Bankim's times. This reinforced the need for an imagined history. This novel had thus, in a sense, to carry the entire burden of a politics that was yet to be born. This made the work not a representation, more a performance, an iteration, an artefact which with its words intended to try making something happen.

It is impossible to fully explain why in Bankim's vision a nation had to be founded on war. It is also difficult to be sure why, in a colonial context, so many nationalist writings invoke Hindu triumph against medieval Muslim monarchs in the name of patriotism. The germs of an explanation may lie in the stigma attached by the British to Bengalis as "effeminate", which had resulted in the exclusion of Bengalis from the coveted colonial military and paramilitary apparatus. Bankim was half persuaded by this colonial stereotyping: in his earlier novels he had returned obsessively to histories of shameful Bengali defeat and cowardice in the face of invasions. Bengali nationalists, Bankim included, had to reach out for Rajput and Maratha histories of resistance against the Mughals when they wanted to depict patriotic wars. The haunting presence of so many defeats and surrenders required a redemptive historical counterpoint – heroism and aggressive masculinity – to procure an honourable future. A

possible recuperation of such heroism in the present, however, remained blocked off by the colonial subjection under which Bengali elite men had conspicuously failed to display valour or effective resistance.

Other poets and playwrights had valorised instances of anti-colonial resistance, even within pusillanimous Bengal, often via the Battle of Plassey, in which some of the generals of the defeated nawab, Siraj-ud-Dowlah, fought to preserve his sovereignty against the troops of Robert Clive; and via the rebellion of peasants who had resisted the tyranny of European indigo planters.[20] But Bankim did not subscribe to such sentiments either, for he had an ambivalent relationship with colonial governance. On the one hand, the decade between 1870 and 1880 – the peak of Bankim's literary career – had been years of mounting colonial repression, some of it directed against the freedom of the public theatre and the vernacular press. Moreover, even as *AM* was appearing in different editions through the mid 1880s, the infamous European agitation against the Ilbert Bill had begun. The bill had displayed colonial racism in a manner more blatant and gross than ever before. Bengali literary and journalistic writings had expressed enormous outrage against it. On the other hand, as Bengali middle-class loyalism during the 1857 uprising had already shown, the modern intelligentsia were unwilling to identify their aspirations for freedom or their longing for a heroic war with a return to the Mughal past, and with the undoing of a colonial modernity with which they had a complex and intimate relationship. Even in his very hard Hindu nationalist phase, Bankim would not spurn what he had learnt from Utilitarian

[20] Nabin Chandra Sen, "Palashir Yuddha"; Dinabandhu Mitra, *Neel Darpan,* and several other plays and poems.

and other political philosophies of the West.[21] So, although it is widely believed that his transference of anger from the British to the Muslims was a tactical compromise, I think he did believe in what the Great Being said to Satyananda at the end of *AM*: the British would teach Hindus the useful sciences. Colonialism was in this sense, for Bankim, a historical necessity.[22]

The two levels of belief clashed, producing an impossible aporia. Subjection meant the loss of manhood whereas war was the breeding ground for heroes; at the same time, war against the British would block Hindu moral and intellectual development. War against Muslims, in an imaginary context, on the other hand, suggested the possibility of throwing up a pattern of masculinity and heroism, of Hindu idealism, which would enhance future nationhood. We must remember yet another compulsion that could have contributed to the particular form of Hindu nationalism we find in *AM*. Colonisation breeds among the colonised the instinct for internal or indigenous colonialism in order to stop being at the receiving end of humiliation and in its place to bring to heel an adversary – an "intimate enemy". In the case of *AM*, this enemy was the Muslim, now in decline and broken, but who had in the past ruled over Hindus. The present powerlessness of the Muslim, combined with the history of his past power, justified the Hindu demand for revenge and made it plausible in the fictive imagination.

I should, however, qualify my suggestion that Bankim found no adequate carrier for his vision of Hindu nationalism. In a very interesting and important book, Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyaya

[21] See, for instance, the frequent use of modern European philosophy in a discursive text that purported to teach methods of authentic Hindu faith: Bankim's "Dharmatattva" (1888), *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 2.

[22] *AM*, pp. 786–8.

has suggested that the Deccan famine of the mid 1870s, and the uprising that Vasudev Balwant Phadke organised against colonial misrule in 1879, had been widely reported in the Bengali press. Phadke's diaries were translated into Bengali by Dakshinacharan Chattopadhyaya in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in 1879.[23] Bankim started writing *AM* very shortly after. He therefore knew of a modern, educated, Brahman youth who was not quite an ascetic but who had severed his ties with his family and his beloved wife. Phadke was a pious Hindu, fearlessly anti-British, who went into the forests and built up an army of tribal people. He had gathered arms by plunder, aiming to loot the Kheda treasury as the first step towards overthrowing foreign rule. Bandyopadhyaya is persuasive in arguing that this would have been a very important impetus towards the conceptualization of *AM*, although there are several differences as well. At no stage, and in no version of *AM*, was the anti-colonial theme paramount, except in an oblique reference within the first edition: "In the deserted temple where the Santans used to worship, the lamp continued to shine and the story of that light may be told elsewhere."[24] This reference to a lamp, whose lonely light shone on, could have indicated the continuation of armed resistance by Phadke well after the Sanyasi risings. At the same time, the theme of Muslim villainy and the will to anti-Muslim violence, which are pervasive in *AM*, are absent in Phadke's revolt writings.

## III

As a text, *AM* has been found quite elusive. There is no certainty about which of its many editions prepared by the author con-

[23] Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyaya, *Anandamath*, Calcutta, 1993.

[24] *AM*, first edition, Calcutta, 1882, p. 191.

stitutes the authentic text. The uncertainty is compounded by suspicions that the textual changes made were not spontaneous but the consequence of political pressure. The novel was first serialised in *Bangadarṣhan*, the avant garde literary journal that Bankim ran and often edited. It appeared between 1881 and 1882, in nine successive issues. It was then published as a book in 1882. In Bankim's own lifetime, five different editions were printed, the last in 1892. Scholars have identified 259 alterations across the five versions.[25]

The changing text produced several related commonsensical as well as scholarly opinions: chiefly that the novel itself was not one work but several, and that the earliest version contained a more pristine account of authorial intentions which had to be radically modified under colonial pressure. Usually, it is assumed that the earliest text is more directly patriotic, issuing forth a clarion call to arms against British rule. In the last version, the original intention needed to cloak itself and moderate its own true energies by transforming the anti-colonial content into an anti-Muslim one, the nawab standing in as something like an alibi for the British. It is said that Bankim, faced with official persecution for the anti-British sentiments of the serialised edition, exercised a form of self-censorship when the novel appeared in book form. He transformed the specifically anti-British words of the earlier versions into anti-Muslim pronouncements. The communal content, therefore, was in this view a tactical camouflage, and the real message was directed against colonialism.[26]

[25] See Aparna Bhattacharya, *Bankim Upanyasher Mool Roop*, and Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyaya, *Anandamath*. Also, Amitrasudan Bhattacharya, *Bankim Bidya*, Calcutta, 1986.

[26] See Sureshchandra Maitra, *Anandamath: Itihashe O Sahitye*, Calcutta, 1983.

In fact, however, if one goes through the different versions and variations, it is difficult to identify substantial changes in plot structure, characterisation, or political message. In the earliest (the serialised) version the locale is specifically the district of Birbhum in Bengal, and concrete geographical features are evoked from time to time: references to the local river Ajay, for instance. In the later versions, significantly, dense local references are dropped, the arena of fictive action being rendered more anonymous and abstract in order to assume the shape of a nation. The maladministration that had resulted in the local food scarcity was in the first version blamed on the local Muslim dynasty. In the next edition, the local dynasty disappears and the Muslim puppet nawab of Bengal is made to shoulder the blame. In the early editions, ascetic heroes aspire to uphold Aryadharma, perhaps an effect of Swami Dayanand's much publicised visit to Bengal in the previous decade and his translation of true Hinduism as Aryadharma. In the 1880s, when *AM* appeared in several editions, Krishnaprasanna Sen and his missionaries of the Aryadharmapracharani Sabha were active in Bengal.[27] In the last edition patriots refer, instead, to Sanatandharma, evoking the name that orthodox opponents of Dayanand provided for Hinduism. I cannot find a very good explanation for the shift in nomenclature, since Bankim did not subscribe to the hard social orthodoxy that the Sanatanists propagated. The altered nomenclature is still worth noting. There are occasions in the first version where British troops alone, and not the larger British structure of governance, are addressed abusively; whereas in the subsequent versions Muslims supplement the British as recipients of abuse from the Santans. This, however, is not a consistent thrust, since

[27] Amiya Kumar Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal*, Delhi, 1993, p. 221.

the earliest version also contains fulsome praise for British martial valour: this was edited out in the subsequent version.

All this scarcely bears out the conventional understanding that the earliest version was ardently anti-British and that, later, Muslims were substituted for the British.[28] Moreover, ferocious denunciations of Muslims remain constant across the various editions. So, the popular notion that Bankim exercised self-censorship on account of colonial persecution, and that this transformed his originary hatred of the British into an opportunist antagonism against Muslims, does not seem convincing.

The fact of colonial pressure or persecution of Bankim on account of *AM* cannot be either proved or firmly disproved. True, Bankim had hesitated for months before he published the serialised novel as a book. In private conversations he had said that he anticipated trouble from official quarters. To guard against this he asked the Brahmo reformer Keshub Chandra Sen to write a preface to the second edition, underlining its politically inoffensive character. Eventually, Keshub's younger brother wrote an article in a journal, parts of which were reprinted as a preface to that edition. Keshub himself wrote to the lieutenant governor, assuring him that it was a patriotic text, not a seditious one.[29] Bankim, moreover, wrote a rather uncharacteristic précis of intent in the first edition which described the Sanyasi rebellion as a "social revolution", and not a political one. He also said here that the novel intended to demonstrate that Bengali wives sometimes aided husbands and sometimes did not – something that the novel actually does not portray. Also, that revolutionaries are suicidal. The message is so tame and staccato, so much

[28] For an exact computation of each alteration, see Aparna Bhattacharya, *Bankim Upanyasher Mool Roop*.

[29] Bagal, Introduction, *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol.1, p. 43.

resembling morals in behavioural manuals rather than his own enterprise, and the self-description is so inept, that we may legitimately infer he was deliberately making the novel sound aseptic to avoid trouble.

But how much trouble actually came his way?

Plenty, it is generally assumed; and that much happened to punish him for this novel. In September 1881 a new post – assistant secretary, finance – had been created for Bengali civil servants of excellence, and Bankim was the first to be awarded it. *AM* was already being serialised, but nothing too critical about British action had appeared as yet in the serials. On 16 January 1882, strong critical language was used for the first time in the serial of that date by Santans to rally a crowd against British troops, whose commander was also mocked and reviled. On 22 January the new post was abolished and Bankim was transferred as an under secretary. Subsequently, the glowing terms that his superiors had earlier used to describe his official performance became markedly lukewarm. So, there is some material to support the claim that he faced discrimination for his writing.[30]

On the other hand, there is some countervailing evidence as well. In fact, there seems to be too short a gap between the first appearance of explicitly anti-British words in the novel and his demotion: a matter of merely six days. It is difficult to imagine that the colonial bureaucracy moved with such alacrity, noting, translating, deliberating on and finally taking action against a passage within less than a week. In the official notification, in the *Calcutta Gazette* of 31 March 1883, we find the novel described as "being actuated by religious and patriotic feelings of a very strong nature." The *Gazette* sees novelistic action as essentially a

[30] Amitrasudan Bhattacharya, *Bankimchandrajibani*, p. 85.

war to drive out Muslim rule, at the end of which the fictional patriots "perceive the necessity and wholesomeness of the English regime in India".[31] As late as 1937 Sir Henry Craik who headed the home department and was a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, wrote to Lord Baden Powell that the novel was a "hymn of hate against Muslims".[32]

When we consider the tradition of literary and performative representations of colonial misrule in plays like *Neel Darpan*, *Sarat Sarojini*, and *Surendra Binodini*, all of which faced persecution in the previous decade, the exhortations against the British in *AM* seem relatively mild, even in the first version. Moreover, such criticisms are always framed within a larger and stronger articulation against Muslim rule and Muslim presence in Bengal. In *Neel Darpan*, in contrast, the unforgettable hero of anti-planter resistance is a young Muslim peasant supported by a Hindu upper-caste young man from a landholding family. The most searing scene in the play occurs when a white planter rapes a pregnant low-caste peasant woman.[33] In *AM*, on the other hand, Muslims are the enemies and brahmanic leaders the heroes. The great leader of the rebels in the novel tells the Company troops who have come to assist the nawab to go away since the fight is

[31] Cited in ibid., p. 596.

[32] Cited in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song*, Delhi, 2004, p. 10.

[33] Dinabandhu Mitra, *Neel Darpan*, first edition, Calcutta, 1861. As we saw in the previous chapter, its English translation provoked a suit of slander from European planters, and the translator, Reverend James Long, was imprisoned. Upendranath Das's *Sarat Sarojini Natak* (1874) and *Surendra Binodini Natak* (1875) led to persecution, and, as noted earlier, the publication of Dakshinaranjan Chattopadhyaya's *Cha Kar Darpan* led to the Dramatic Performances Act in 1876.

not with them, it is against the Muslims. Only when the British refuse to withdraw does the action get extended against them, at a somewhat late stage in the novel. And even at the height of the battles against the British, anti-Muslim exhortations do not cease.

We cannot, therefore, conclude that Bankim was seriously targeted by a nervous or angered state machinery. Nor can we conclude that any version of his actually invited deliberate persecution. As I suggested in the previous chapter, colonial censorship was always more alert against audio-visual criticism in the theatre, and against criticism in popular daily newspapers, than against erudite and entirely literary texts. This situation only changed later, in the time of the anti-partition Swadeshi upsurge, when the patriotic hymn from the novel – or a fragment from it that was turned into a slogan in mass demonstrations – invited spectacular police repression. This was further heightened with the growth of revolutionary terrorism, many years after the novel's publication, when that movement read *AM* as its inspirational text. Even then, the persecution that *AM* met was only specifically in relation to the nationalist action embedded within words in the novel. The novel as a whole was never banned.

Another layer of controversies surrounded *AM* after Bankim's death. While he was alive, Muslim critics had been deeply disturbed by the tenor of the exhortations against Muslims. Nonetheless, the hymn "Bande Mataram" in *AM* had emerged as the de facto national anthem, sung at Congress sessions from about 1894, when Rabindranath Tagore put it to music and sang it.[34] From the 1930s the Muslim League – routed in the elections of 1937 even in Muslim-majority provinces and casting around for an issue to rally a Muslim support base – focused on the

[34] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Vande Mataram*, pp. 33–5.

communal elements in the song and criticised its stature in Congress circles as evidence of the communal nature of the Congress itself. The League's view was lent strength by the fact that some of the provincial Congress ministries showed a poor record in combating Hindu communalism. In the Central Provinces, the Congress ministry had made "Bande Mataram" a compulsory song, even for Muslim students, in government-aided schools. Side by side, from at least the 1920s, Hindu communalists had used the chant as a rallying cry in communal violence, as the counterpart of the Muslim invocation Allah-o-Akbar. Both V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had adopted the song as the ideal embodiment of the Hindu nation that they wanted.

Nationalist Muslims found it difficult to chant "Bande Mataram" since the song personified the motherland as a goddess, thereby putting it out of reach of Muslims and Christians whose faith could not acknowledge a personified divinity, least of all one embodied in a specifically Hindu form.[35] And yet, despite the obvious problem, a commitment to such a representation of the country had been made a litmus test of patriotism for non-Hindu nationalists. This created a vicious circle. Young Muslim men were kept out of revolutionary terrorist outfits because they could not bow before an image of the country in imitation of the initiation ceremony in *AM*. Unsurprisingly Muzaffar Ahmad, a founder of Bengali communism, described the novel as "full of communal hatred from beginning to end."[36]

Several meetings were organized by Muslim students to protest the Congress valorisation of "Bande Mataram". At one such

[35] Ibid., pp. 39–43.

[36] Ibid., p. 28.

meeting at the Calcutta Muslim Institute, Hemprobha Majumdar tried to persuade students that the Congress meant no offence to Muslim sentiments by the special value it placed on the song. The students, in return, explained at great length why they felt so strongly against it, and got the impression that she understood their feelings. Jasimuddin, a renowned poet and great admirer of Rabindranath, made a speech at this meeting. He said he was very disappointed that even though Rabindranath had agreed with his sentiments in private conversations, he had failed to criticize the song in public. Jasimuddin's speech was reported in the papers. Subsequently, Rabindranath sent a message to Jasimuddin through his nephew, Soumyendranath Tagore. He was told that Jawaharlal Nehru had sought Rabindranath's advice on the use of the song, and that Rabindranath had told him to drop certain passages from Congress sessions.[37]

All this forced a review of the use of the song upon the Congress, leading to considerable introspection. Gandhi had been impressed by the song's ardent patriotism in 1915. In 1947, rereading it in the light of unprecedented Hindu–Muslim violence and of the new and terrible context in which the words were being recited, he wrote: "That was no religious cry . . . It was a purely political cry. It should never be a chant to insult or offend the Muslims." Nehru went further. He had begun to read the novel in translation in 1937. He too had until then accepted "Bande Mataram" as a religio-patriotic chant. But reading the song within the novel, he was disturbed. He asked Rabindranath if the translation was accurate and said: "It does seem that the background is likely to irritate the Muslims." Rabindranath

[37] Jasimuddin, "Rabindra Smriti", in Anisuzzaman, ed., *Rabindranath*, Dacca, 1968, pp. 21–2.

wrote back saying the first two stanzas contained no offensive material and could be chanted in Congress sessions. In 1937 a Congress committee deleted all but the first two stanzas from its sessions, and declared that any other non-controversial patriotic song could be substituted for "Bande Mataram" in the sessions if the organisers so desired. Faced with renewed discomfort after Partition, the Constituent Assembly in 1951 announced that Tagore's song "Jana Gana Mana" should be India's national anthem even though "Bande Mataram" would enjoy equal honour as a national song.[38]

It is relevant to mention here that the first two stanzas of the song evoke the gentle, peaceful, tender landscape of Bengal as the object of devotion. The land is the earth, the source of life and nurture, of love and beauty. In subsequent verses the land is dissolved, it disappears into the body of a goddess, ten-armed, demon-slaying, carrying weapons. At one level, this personification of the country – its deification in a Hindu devotional image – puts it beyond non-Hindu affective reach, idolatry and the personification of divinity being prohibited, especially in Islam. At another level, the evocation of an armed goddess, ready for the kill, portended a history that Muslims could not possibly accept, given the narrative context of *AM*. The novel leaves the reader with no doubt that the enemies of the Mother are Muslims, that the weapons in her hands and the strength in her children are directed against them.

In 1983 yet another controversy flared up in the West Bengal assembly when, faced with a Congress demand that the government actively propagate the novel, a number of ruling Left Front partners either abstained from voting or absented themselves.

[38] Ibid., pp. 33–4.

Even CPI(M) objections were couched in rather apologetic terms: such propagation might create communal dissensions in the state, given its controversial nature. In a sense, this put the burden of unreasonableness upon Muslims: it was implied that they could disrupt law and order in the state if the government encouraged a valorisation of the song. Commenting on the debates, Partha Chatterjee strongly critiqued Bankim's perspective on Muslims, arguing that in refusing to engage with it the Left was moving away from its "historic right to criticize our own heritage..."[39]

Arguments and searing controversies have haunted the heritage of *AM* across an entire century and more. Such a range of contentious opinions adds to the image of a fluid, elusive text. Let me point out a few peculiarities in the terms of the debates. We find a series of recensions in arguments about the novel. Rarely has it been seen or discussed as a whole, a single text. Most often, the hymn has been separated out and debated without reference to the novel. The hymn had, in fact, been composed independently of the novel sometime in the 1870s, and then inserted within *AM*. As a result, people debating the novel felt free to restore it to its free-standing status, thereby denying any accretions of meaning that occurred through its relocation within *AM*. I would argue that its reinscription within the novel created a new organic relationship with the larger literary and political meanings that the novel carried.

"Bande Mataram" apart, controversies also swirled around the changes in the novel's various editions. The availability of multiple versions has been read to imply that *AM* was an open

[39] Partha Chatterjee, "The Heritage We Dare Not Renounce", in *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, Delhi, 1997, pp. 1–6.

and fluid novel, never achieving formal closure as a bounded and coherent text.[40] That the variations across editions are relatively minor, and that despite changes in each edition we always have a definitive and bounded text – however plural or ambivalent its internal implications – does not seem to have overly impressed readers and critics. Yet another reading strategy has been to deduce a single, essential nature for the novel from its effects. Most Congress nationalists honed in on the novel's anti-British exhortations and dismissed other novelistic elements as minor, irrelevant, as tactical compromises or masks hiding authentic authorial intention. Hindutva ideologues on the other hand seized upon the words of hatred towards Muslims and the call for the foundation of a Hindu nation as *AM*'s true and sacred core.[41] And, ironically, the opening words of "Bande Mataram" have been the chant or slogan both for highly secular Congress anti-colonial public agitations as well as for Hindu communalists in moments of violence.

Finally, there have been attempts to read the novel through critical strategies of overlay and obliteration. In these readings, a variety of sentiments are culled out of Bankim's earlier and later novels and essays; these are then layered over the text of *AM* to obliterate discomfiting elements within it. For instance, Bankim's earlier portrayals of good Muslims, as well as his later critiques of Hindu patriots who degenerate, are extracted out of his larger literary corpus to cancel out the imaging of a specifically Hindu nation, and the obvious anti-Muslim violence and denunciation of Muslims, within *AM*. It is as if the novel cannot be granted an autonomous existence even for a moment, it cannot be

[40] See Amitrasudan Bhattacharya, *Bankim Bidya*.

[41] Both Savarkar and Golwalkar admired the novel and the hymn. The hymn is sung daily at all RSS *shakhas*.

allowed to stand on its own without being corrected by the rest of Bankim.[42] I agree that Bankim moved on from the thrust of *AM* in several ways, and that his earlier writings say very different things about Hindu society and power relations. So it is perfectly correct to argue that *AM* is an experimental moment within a wide and complex literary history that Bankim's work encompasses. Yet the novel must, I think, be regarded as an entire moment, possessing a fateful power all its own. Or, rather, many different kinds of power. The words and images that form the dominant motifs in the text have a powerful resonance that cannot be wished away or cancelled out by others. At the same time, they do not entirely exhaust the potential of the novel. In what follows I will first dwell on the more obvious aspects of the text and then try to show how there are simultaneous parallel texts or self-deconstructive moves that traverse the novel's surface images and messages.

## III

The novel unfolds in Padachinha village, Birbhum. This is shown as once prosperous; but now a deathly silence engulfs the landscape. Scorched by the midday heat, a famine rages all around the village. Every manner of production has ceased, all social intimacies have evaporated. So bereft of humanity are the environs that they already resemble the forests beyond. Large, abandoned mansions denote the futility of wealth in the absence of food. Mahendra, a Brahman landlord, leaves the village with

[42] See, for instance, Sureshchandra Maitra, *Anandamath: Itihashe O Sahitye;* and Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyaya, *Anandamath*. Very often it is assumed that if there was a hidden anti-British transcript which was more evident in the early editions, the intent of the novel must be national, not communal. This is to suggest that nationalism cannot equally be anti-Muslim.

his wife, Kalyani, and his baby daughter, Sukumari, for the city in search of sustenance: the perennial theme of famine narratives. The family gets separated; the wife and daughter are waylaid by marauding robbers. They are rescued by a band of dedicated ascetics, the Santans, who are now engaged in skirmishes with the forces of the nawab of Bengal. Mahendra is arrested by the royal troops, who think he is one of the Santans. He is soon rescued by the Santans but spurns them as criminals. He is then introduced to the doctrine of patriotic insurrection through the revelation to him of a temple which houses three sequential images of a deity that he has never come across: this is the deity of the Motherland. He is told she is the greatest of all divinities, that her lustre is presently dimmed by Muslim tyranny, and that she is to be worshipped via the elimination of Muslim rule and Muslim presence in the land. The Santans explain their mission to Mahendra: they are engaged in a battle unto the finish with the forces of the evil nawab. For the duration of the war, they have renounced all earthly ties; any union with women must be paid for by death. All caste privileges too must be renounced for the war requires a camaraderie which supersedes the rules of everyday life. After the victory, normalcy in personal and caste relations will be restored.

The Santans describe themselves as Vaishnavs, or worshippers of Vishnu, but they are Vaishnavs with a difference: they worship Krishna as a demon slayer, not as the erotic figure or the child figure – the tropes most common within the Bengali Vaishnav imaginary. At the same time, the Santans worship a female figure of the Motherland as Mother Goddess – she is the deity who calls for war. In this sense, their devotion comes close to Shakta worship, directed towards the figure of the bloodthirsty goddess Kali; indeed, at the temple, Kali denotes the image of

the Motherland in the present moment. For this reason, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries colonial officials were uncertain whether *AM* depicted devotion to Kali or to the goddess of the Motherland. By superimposing a mother goddess on a reinflected Krishna bhakti, Bankim here unifies the two great sectarian traditions of Bengali devotionalism, Shakta and Vaishnav.

It is during Mahendra's encounter with the divine images in the temple that the hymn "Bande Mataram" is first sung and explained. Subsequently, it is sung in battles against Muslims and the British, alternating with a verse from a medieval Vaishnav hymn which is taken from Jayadeva's *Geeta Govindam*, a verse that celebrates Krishna as the slayer of two demons. Mahendra joins up with the holy warriors, and he and the Santans fight hard against the temptations of love, not always very successfully. Shanti, the forsaken wife of a Santan, Jibanananda, joins her husband disguised as a man. She too fights valiantly, resolutely protecting herself and her husband against their mutual desire.

The Santans win great victories. They also initiate and train ordinary villagers who celebrate each victory against the nawab with mob attacks on Muslim villagers, killing them, routing their homes, and desecrating their faith. "Kill, kill the Muslim wretches", they scream, as they longingly ask each other: "Brother, will that day ever come when we will demolish their mosques to build temples for Radhamadhav?"[43] Their ascetic leaders train them to attack Muslims and exhort them with rallying cries like "Squeeze the Muslims front and behind and kill them", and "Throw their birds' nests to the four winds, throw the city of unclean people into the river, set fire to these pig sties and purify

[43] *AM*, p. 768.

Mother Earth. Raze their buildings to dust, burn and drown these pig sties..."[44] When British troops ally with the forces of the nawab, the leaders of the Santans try to dissuade them: "We have no quarrel with you . . . let the English triumph..."[45] When the British troops continue with their attacks, the war broadens on two fronts and Santans kill English troops with determination and resolve.

Finally, the nawab is thoroughly routed despite British help, but the battlefield is spattered with dead Santans, their armies exhausted. Satyananda is told by an unnamed divine presence, called both Great Being and Healer, that his mission is accomplished with the overthrow of the Muslims. The English will henceforth rule Bengal under divine providence, since the aim of the war was to force them to assume direct power, dislodging the Muslims. Satyananda is unreconciled, having failed to instal Hindu power. The Great Being explains divine providence to him: the English will respect the Hindu faith, in fact they will augment the Eternal Faith (Sanatan Dharma) of Hindus by augmenting their knowledge of the material world, thereby adding to their already considerable spiritual prowess. Hindus need this period of tutelage to complete the scope of their faith. So Satyananda desists from the war, but his sorrow is undiminished. He begs forgiveness from the Mother Goddess, he laments that he did not die fighting for he has failed to instal Hindu power and has allowed another breed of Yavanas (unclean aliens) to claim her.

Satyananda's sorrow has been interpreted by secular nationalists as a call for continuing the struggle against foreign rule. Moreover, the battle scenes against the British troops pulsate

[44] Ibid., p. 742.

[45] Ibid., p. 771.

with a passion no less strident than that with which the Santans engage with Muslims. This too has offered credibility to the secular-nationalist reading of the novel as a covert anti-British text from which the anti-Muslim sections can be weeded out without structural damage to its unity or dominant thrust. The argument is that the most powerful ideal in the novel is nationalist inspiration which takes shape as the death-defying ideal of patriotism. A case for this is made out even from the first short passage with which the novel opens. This passage depicts a primeval and silent forest in which two disembodied voices are heard. One promises all in the service of the cause. When asked what this means, the reply in the serialised version is: "The lives of our dearest ones."[46] In the first edition of the book this was changed to "Life". A new reply was added: "Life is unimportant, anyone can sacrifice it." A question follows: "What more is there to give away?" The answer comes: "Bhakti."[47] A vision of patriotism that holds life as trivial, which holds devotion to the Mother Goddess as the highest value in life, acts here as a beacon of faith and resolve, representing the fictional realisation of a political necessity embraced by later nationalists.

Most important for emergent nationalism was the simultaneous construction and elevation of the new goddess as the highest treasure in individual and collective life. *AM* was not the first embodiment of the Motherland. In a play of 1873 called *Bharatmata* enacted before packed theatre halls, the Motherland speaks and weeps. She is a wan, pale figure of absolute abjection, stripped of all possessions by white men who appear on the stage to kick and abuse her while her children slumber on. At the end,

[46] Aparna Bhattacharya, *Bankim Upanyasher Mool Roop,* and Amitrasudan Bhattacharya, *Bankim Bidya.*

[47] *AM*, p. 715.

a good Sahib comes and promises her that another Mother, the British Queen, will bring her woes to an end.[48] What *AM* does is dramatise and transfigure the image of abjection into a lustrous, powerful deity.

There are, however, occasional hints of this goddess's subordination to a male divinity, or to a still greater power of uncertain gender. In the temple, she is held on the lap of Vishnu. Kalyani, in a dream, sees her as a mournful figure, standing before a being of such radiance that its gender cannot be ascertained; she thinks the form had a female shape. The Motherland stood before this higher being and complained that Mahendra would not come to her because of his love for Kalyani. The higher being then commanded Kalyani to give up her husband to a greater cause. This seems to place the Motherland in a somewhat lower place within the divine hierarchy. At the same time, the song proclaims that the Motherland is the highest object of devotion: "It is your image that we worship in every temple."[49]

The narrative proceeds by establishing correspondences among three levels: in the novel's time-space, in the song, and among the three images in the temple. This is to say that what happens to the history of the country is re-enacted in the succession of images in the temple, and is also encapsulated in the sequence within the song. Famine constitutes the narrative time, the frame of experience: famine stalks the landscape. Settled landholders are driven out on to streets, upper-caste women flee into forests, the land is devastated. Indeed, famine and forest merge to provide the central chronotope or unity of time and space in the novel. (A large part of Bengal's agricultural land had, indeed, returned

[48] Kiranchandra Ray, *Bharatmata*, Calcutta, 1873.

[49] This occurs in the hymn: *AM*, p. 726.

to dense jungle in the course of the famine.) Villagers are spectral figures of terror; they emerge as ghostly shadows, naked and cadaverous. They are ready to devour human flesh, to tear each other apart. This tone of unrelieved and barbaric darkness is highlighted by its counterpoints; occasions are scooped out of the time of hunger and filled with nurture, nourishment, hot food and warm milk, images of love and satiety.

The hymn, too, begins with an evocation of the goddess as Land: land as it used to be, green and ripe with overflowing crops. In the temple, the first image of the goddess resembles the past of plenitude. The goddess, in her original conceptualisation, is one who introduced cultivation and transformed the wilderness into a rich landscape. Famine is thus double loss: starvation is more than the absence of food in the present moment, it denotes the absence of the green land of the past, of a bounteous and benevolent goddess. This is echoed in the hymn: the image of a serene land is succeeded by the angry clamour and slash of swords – just as, within the novel, the land fills up with cannibalistic villagers. In the temple, a splendid goddess transforms herself into a vindictive, bloodthirsty one. The first divine image in the tripartite sequence is that of Jagaddhatri, the goddess of agriculture who cleared the forests and tamed wild beasts. Kali, the second goddess, denotes the lapse from production and civilisation; she marks the time of reversion to the jungles. The past and present of the goddess are, finally, overlaid by the most glorious third image of the Mother of the future, the time of becoming: the image of demon-slaying Durga, who encompasses might and glory, learning and wealth, who triumphs over demons.

The goddess of the future, of Mother-in-becoming, is not just symbolic of a recovery of the prelapsarian state. The third

and final figure is no clearer of forests, she is not a food giver, nor is she the embodiment of nurture. She is an imperial figure, trampling over enemies; her might and glory are her more remarkable features. In the song, at the very end, there is a return to the theme of the green and benign land, but more as a necessary refrain, a throwback to the first segment with which a song must end. The dominant vision that remains with us is that of Dashapraharanadharini Durga: a Durga whose ten arms hold lethal weapons.

"The central preoccupation of the Bengal Puranas", writes Kunal Chakrabarti, "is with the goddess cult." He traces the pervasiveness of the female divinity to tribal cults which, over centuries, were assimilated into a brahmanical tradition, finding fulness of form in the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Markandeya Purana* around the sixth century AD. The reinstalled goddess, neither wholly non-Vedic nor fully brahmanic, was a product of interacting traditions.[50] In *AM*, this process of cultic construction which stretched thousands of years is repeated but accomplished in an instant. Divinities from the established mythic tradition are pulled out from their separate contexts and realigned to produce a new deity. They interact in a new fictive context to finally merge and appear anew as a higher divine form. The novel is transparent about this construction. At the same time, the power of the construction and of the constructed product obscures the normally long process of goddess-making. It allows her, in *AM*, to blend into and dominate a divine landscape via the fictional technique of foreshortening. Just as Mahendra is astonished at the mention of the new goddess but is persuaded of her reality

[50] Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, Delhi, 2001, pp. 2, 169–70.

by the sheer grandeur of the images, the reader suspends disbelief and accepts the new goddess along with her proclaimed status even as the novel lays bare the sources of her construction.

In inventing a new goddess, the construction material that Bankim used included relatively new elements. The annual worship of Jagaddhatri had been introduced into Bengal as late as the eighteenth century by the leading conservative Hindu king Krishnachandra Raya of Krishnagore.[51] Bankim's invention, therefore, followed an established tradition of expanding the sacred pantheon and increasing the occasions of collective worship. At the same time, worship of the country took animism to new heights. In the sacred *Ramayana* of Valmiki, one's birthplace and motherland are valorized above even heaven. Both, however, have immediate, bounded, concretely personal connotations, referring to an actual human mother and a specific area of land to which the ancestral homestead belongs. Bankim's new goddess makes abstractions out of both and unifies these two non-sacred elements into a divine figure.

Patriotism is provided embodiment, a figuration, and made a glowing object of worship in his novel. In the same measure, the country is reified. It begins as a green land, as nurture for the people who constitute it. It then assumes the form of a goddess, separated and held above people and land, a higher being who commands the populace. Now, those who belong to the land are located as the subjects of the goddess; they no longer constitute the country, nor does the country exist to nurture them. The Mother has purposes of her own that the people must fulfil; they must rid her of her enemies. The land recedes, as do figures of nurture and social welfare.

[51] Diwan Kartikeyachandra Ray, *Khitish Bansabali Charit*, in Kanchan Basu, ed., *Dushprapya Sahitya Sangraha*, vol. 3, Calcutta, 1992, p. 31.

In this reconstituted bhakti, the deity is split into three forms, each corresponding partially to three known Hindu goddesses: Jagaddhatri, the food giver; Kali, the naked Shakti of destructive force; and Durga, the demon slayer. In sharp contrast to popular Hindu devotionalism, this composite and unified goddess – the goddess of the Motherland – has no mythology, no life-events of her own. No concrete stories adhere to her. She carries with her three historical phases, abstractly conveyed, not through mythological events but through static, iconic representations. The narrative moves through a linked cluster of events concerning the Santans and their enemies. From a Heideggerian perspective this immediate time, or within-time-ness, that frames the narrative would be seen as enfolded within a larger fold of historicality, whereby an extended past would seem to have shaped the immediate events at hand. In *AM*, however, that historical causality is constituted by Muslim evil-doing and its fatal consequences for Hindus. And the ultimate flow of time as a whole – temporality in its broadest terms, which is constituted by the linking up of present, past, and future times – is shown as the repetitive recurrence of a cycle: the presence of glorious divinity, its loss, and its recuperation through war and devotion. These three phases and faces of the goddess contain an entire temporality. Time is held within this divine fate as history.[52]

In conventional Vaishnav bhakti forms, the devotee meditates on the life-events of a deity, identifies with his or her companions, and immerses herself in the contemplation of the divine play (*leela*).[53] Such acts of absorbed contemplation can break down

[52] For a critical engagement with Heidegger's three levels of time, see Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, 1980, pp. 169–76.

[53] S.K. De, *The Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movements in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1959.

gender boundaries. Male devotees may identify with a female figure associated with the deity, and vice versa. In the novel, such popular absorption in divine life-events is replaced by a contemplation of three human-temporal phases in the history of divine activity. There then occurs an even more startling break with all the given conventions of bhakti: the devotee assumes charge of divine activity. In imitation of the armed, demon-slaying activity of the deity, he becomes a saviour, recuperating divine glory from the clutches of a demon. From contemplation, the devotee is plunged into action; from an immersion in the divine life, he intervenes in the history of that life. The usual relationship between deity and devotee is transformed. Divine activism is frozen into certain iconic postures, and the devotee assumes the role of action on behalf of divinity. Even the martial Krishna of the epics had proclaimed that He would deliver the Earth of evildoers: in *AM*, the activist-devotee seeks to recover divine glory himself by becoming a saviour hero. The song counts the crores of sons (Santans) that the Mother possesses, all of them armed and ready to kill: "With such might, why should you be powerless?"[54] Strength here flows from the human to the divine, reversing the trajectory of bhakti. Divinity is poured back and fixed into an image, an icon. Human devotees have here taken action out of divine hands and into their own.

Worship is separated from ritualism and from the ecstatic contemplation of divine leela. It is relocated on a new register: that of war. This holy war retains all the features of ardent devotion, the throbbing passions, the peaks and climaxes of feeling that occur at moments of mystical ecstasy, often through religious

[54] Ironically, as is well known, Bankim counted the entire population of Bengal as computed by the colonial census, thereby including a very substantial number of Muslims. *AM*, p. 726.

ritual music and dance. War is also religious obligation, enjoined upon by the goddess in imitation of her own warlike aspect. If in the first phase of the hymn the land, the rivers, the green crops and golden fruits, the mellow light and sweet words of Bengal evoke a country, from the third verse we have a clash of swords and naked, unsheathed weapons lusting for blood. The elongated, flowing, lush sounds of the first two verses disappear; harsh, staccato syllables take their place. In the final verse the goddess stabilises as a figure of magnificence and plenty, shedding her dreadful aspects. But she retains her weapons, she tramples on demons. In the temple, too, the figure of pure nurture, tenderness, and love – the goddess who sows crops and transforms the wilderness – is not recovered. We have instead a figure of radiance and magnificence retaining her arms and displaying her might. The history of war, of revenge, and of death-dealing triumph mark the new divine form.

This tripartite narrative of the goddess of the nation is initially held together by the explanatory frame of the famine. Beginning with basic life-giving food and its deprivation, famine dissolves and war becomes an end in itself, without requiring the legitimising memory of deprivation. In the same measure, Hindu power is declared as an end in itself; it is not merely the replacement of a particular tyrant or foreign rule, nor is it a palliative for famine; it is an act of eternal revenge.

If famine is the condition, the explanation, and the inspiration for the call for total revenge – the first explicit message in our literary history for ethnic cleansing – the ravages of famine are not, as one might have expected, embodied in peasant suffering. Instead, they are configured in the uprooted family of a Brahman landlord. Marauding villagers, reduced to cannibals, evoke horror. Yet, facing identical circumstances, the Brahman

couple does not lose its humanity; both man and woman possess an instinctive capacity for heroic action.

The contrast between these two sets of Hindus, their alliances now based on unequal functions and conditions, finds a precise analogue in the images of the goddess which represents her present state on the one hand, and her past and future forms on the other. Naked Kali, shameless and ravenous, wearing human skulls and trampling the prostrate body of her divine consort, resembles the peasant-turned-robber. By contrast, the benign Mother is a more brahmanical and purer divine form whose progeny is ideally embodied in upper-caste Santans. They organise peasants into militant bands and teach them to harass Muslims, which they do with gusto: "They steal weapons from their dead enemies, they stamp upon their dead faces . . . some looted travellers and shopkeepers . . . some demanded women . . . all sang Bande Mataram, Glory to the Mother Goddess . . . everyone said the Muslims are routed, the country has returned to Hindus . . . they formed bands at night and set fire to Muslim houses, and began to loot all . . . Many Muslims were killed . . . some shaved off their beards and began to call themselves by Hindu names . . ."[55] Even when organised for a holy purpose, ordinary villagers behave like a mob. The core Santans, on the other hand, charge fearlessly into battle in classic heroic stances, with gestures and words of undying patriotism and heroism.

The contrast does not suggest a dichotomy, but rather a necessary stratification of functions and competences: peasants need to join the band out of sheer greed and an instinct for violence. They swell an army whose true purpose is concealed from them, even as they carry out commands to kill from social superiors who

[55] *AM*, p. 768.

have declared a temporary caste truce to better execute the holy war. Unlike the landlord Mahendra, the peasants do not glimpse the divine figure, nor is the song explained to them. While they belong to the holy army and to the Hindu nation despite their base instincts, the sanctioned baseness of the rank and file can be read simultaneously as a lack of conviction in the foundational act within the formation of this Hindu nation. Does the novel put an interrogation mark against its own vision by underlining the brutalisation that it must bring forth? Does it narrativise the sacred war as a sequence built up by a chain of inhuman acts?

## IV

If Bankim had changed elements of received and known histories to narrate the nation, what had he suppressed within his own earlier convictions and themes? It seems that the nation here imposes the burden of locating a suitable social level of leadership that overturned Bankim's earlier historical understanding and social criticism. Acutely aware of the peasant problem, and seeing it as equally a burden for Hindu, low-caste, and Muslim peasants oppressed by landlords as well as by the middle classes and the upper castes, Bankim had earlier written with great compassion of class, gender, and caste injustice, about exploitation. When he leaves the realm of social power and inaugurates the agenda of Hindu nationhood in *AM*, those priorities are turned askew. He needs heroes, he needs leaders in wars, he needs figures of glory rather than social justice. Peasants are ignoble auxiliaries, upper-caste ascetics and landlords must be their leaders and heroes. Class and caste divides are now constituted not by exploitation but by characterological difference. At the same time, leadership is earned through an act of sacrifice; the initiation of the Santan is preceded by a pledge which requires him to abdicate caste privileges – for the duration of the war. The old Bankim

thus returns fleetingly as a trace: leadership must be earned by the suspension of privilege, even if temporary.

The other instance of significant departure-cum-retention from Bankim's earlier corpus lies in the complete absence of Muslim characters in *AM*. In almost all of his earlier historical novels, Bankim had crafted an intricate range of Hindu–Muslim relations; he created Muslim figures in delicate, multiple, and complex ways. Hindus and Muslims love each other, they abuse each other, they fight one another, and they also fight together. The worst of adversaries wear human faces, negotiate difficult and complicated emotions, exceed stereotypes and conventional expectations.[56] In *AM*, a novel made out of war against Muslims, not a single living Muslim appears. Is this because a finality of hatred, which promises total extermination of the enemy, cannot afford to confront the enemy in concrete human form? Must the desire for extermination be powered by abstract hatred? Or does it, conversely, weaken the impulse to hate, since the cause of hatred is not located in concrete events and people but in abstract historical judgement?

Finally, the dominant and stirring cry for war and Hindu glory is obliquely undercut by another instance. Let us go back to the short introductory chapter. An unearthly voice asks the devotee what he can bring to the act of sacrifice. The devotee offers his own life. The reply is that life is a small matter. The devotee asks: What else is there? The answer is bhakti.

Note the first response: Life is a small matter, anyone can part with it. The unspoken sequel is this: Whoever can sacrifice his own life is entitled to take a life in exchange. Patriotism, in this version, is basically a matter of dying and killing. The goddess needs human sacrifice. Death emerges, as the novel begins, as

[56] On this, see my "Imagining Hindu Rashtra : The Hindu and the Muslim in Bankimchandra's Writings", in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation.*

the keyword: the death of the enemy, the death of the self. If selfhood is a matter of self-narration, if narrative unity is centred around that idea, then the collective self of Hindu nationalism is founded on this inaugural transaction with Death. It is the condition for the nation: death made easy, natural, instinctive.

What must the nationalist text kill, repress, obliterate out of its own past, its own history? The concern for peasant poverty, the love of life-affirming emotions, the absorption in the life of the beloved: all these are part of the great sacrifice. The lovers, the wives, the friends in the novel, all celebrate the death of their loved ones: they have fully internalised the hegemonic vision which has proclaimed it is easy to die. The ability to relate to the Other as an enrichment and pluralization of one's own human potential – so evident in Bankim's earlier novels even when enmity is depicted – is abdicated. The final Other is now the Muslim. The Muslim must figure as a condensation, the focus of absolute hate: faceless, anonymous, abstract, beyond histories, beyond human contact.

There are, at the same time, intimate Others who constitute the real core of the Self. The novel insists that they, too, must be given up, renounced with ease. Shanti and Jibanananda repress their erotic love for each other, they renounce their sexuality. Mahendra and Kalyani pledge themselves to celibacy. Families are separated, parents give up children. Death and sacrifice, renunciation and abandonment, fill up the novelistic space and create the stuff of heroism.

Bankim says in the first edition that one of the purposes of the novel is to establish that "rebels are suicidal".[57] This is usually taken to be a tactical statement assuring the British that the

[57] Bagal, Introduction, *Bankim Rachanabali*, p. 43.

novelist does not identify with his fictional heroes. But I read the statement more seriously, seeing it as introducing an element of alienation, or self-distancing, from the dominant thrust, tone, and message of the novel. What I find even more significant is the passage Bankim cites from Kalidas's classical poetry in *Kumarasambhavam*, from the chapter on Rativilap in which Rati, consort of the god of love, mourns her lover, killed by an enraged Shiva for daring to break into his meditation and for tempting him with Parvati's beauty.[58] The passage is a curious insertion, not obviously related to the dominant concerns or messages of the novel. Kalidas elaborates on the pain of a love that is broken by death, for a death that serves some divine purpose. This does not suggest the tone of the Santans, who hold life entirely lightly, or of Shanti, who finds it entirely possible to live with her husband without desire. Bankim explains in his dedication that the citation was written in memory of Dinabandhu Mitra, whose death he mourned by dedicating the novel to him. The theme of *viraha*, the pain of separation, finds added resonance here: a death is mourned, a lost friendship evoked. The mood of the dedication seems thus, in a sense, flung against the message of the novel's opening passage in which human lives are held trivial. The dedication is marginal to the novel, whereas the opening passage forms the novel's core, adumbrating its dominant thrust. Yet, as we know, margins too can unravel the centre.[59]

I would place great emphasis on the signifying function of the Kalidas passage. The novel proclaims the triviality of life and of all that gives it value, beyond the lust for war and for the

[58] Cited in ibid., p. 42. On the surface, he meant this passage to denote his mourning for a departed friend, Dinabandhu Mitra, the great playwright.

[59] I am grateful to Asoke Sen for bringing this important explanation of the dedication to my notice.

glory of the Hindu nation. At the same time, an ache for lost love animates certain encounters. When Shanti and Jibanananda meet after a long separation, they embrace and kiss, they utter words of mutual passion, they reaffirm their undying love. The threat of the ultimate penance for this act of transgression – an embrace to be paid for by death – cannot deter them, for they will not resist their tempestuous love at this moment. Bankim was a superb craftsman of scenes and words of mutual desire, he was at his most powerful here. Only after establishing the beauty and strength of their desire, the potency of their sexuality, can he move on to places where they hold firm to their resolve of celibacy. The sense of waste and loss involved in such ascetic-heroic undertaking cannot be obliterated, nor can a sense of what is meant by killing the centre of selfhood. So, the light-hearted dismissal of life in the Introduction is here counterpointed strongly. I do not suggest that the overarching themes of heroic self-sacrifice and revenge are thereby irrevocably undercut, minimised, or overturned. The words and images that convey the latter retain their power, their resonance, their effectiveness. At the same time, they are fractured by the alternative realm of love and desire.

The chronotope of famine-ridden forests, the time of violence and danger, are very occasionally punctuated, interrupted, by such deviant, incommensurable events. Even in the middle of famine and forest, of war and plunder, there is a village, a grove, an oasis of humanity that has miraculously escaped the catastrophe. Jibanananda takes the lost baby Sukumari to his sister there. She is an ordinary, non-heroic woman who has lost a baby of her own. She feeds the little girl warm milk, she feeds her famished brother rice and fish and vegetables. She finds motherhood; the baby is safe, the hungry brother is sated. These are redemptive images of ordinariness, of an innocent,

uncomplicated, and low-key contentment whose infinite preciousness is underlined by the framing bleakness of war and famine. The episode is literally snatched out of the dominant chronotope; it is, as Bakhtin might have said, "a time of honey" that escapes famine and war, inhumanity and heroism.[60] A similar affirmation of the ordinariness of life, of love and caring, returns like a brief refrain when Kalyani and Mahendra play with their baby daughter in the midst of devastation – as the baby laughs, her parents watch her with joy.

## V

The sombre, weighty and hypercharged language of *AM* is fractured with words of tenderness, with periodic evocations of gentle peace in a tranquil land, with rare but vivid humour and wit. This enhances the ugliness of revenge; it vividly suggests the death of the self that nation-worship demands.

In his novel *Ghare Baire*, Rabindranath Tagore carried out a dialogue with *AM* and its hymn, even though he loved the first two verses of the song. The protagonist of Tagore's novel, Nikhilesh, refuses to worship the Country as divine being. He does love it, but he will worship God alone, and no other being. Above all, in a remarkable allusion to Bankim's two peasants in "Bangadesher Krishak", Nikhilesh does not see the resplendent visage of a goddess when he thinks of his country. Instead, he sees a low-caste and a Muslim peasant, exploited, ignorant, antiheroes. The Country, for him, is no more and no less than these starving and deluded people.[61] Patriotism entails social justice

[60] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, Texas, 1981, p. 103.

[61] Rabindranath Tagore, *Ghare Baire*, Calcutta, 1915, reprinted in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 2, Calcutta, 1961, p. 715.

for such people, it cannot be waived in the name of some larger national interest.

Rabindranath challenged a great deal that had come to be seen as nationalist common sense, and his novel turned out to be deeply unpopular. Nationalists of a different bent preferred a deified nation whose land and people served as mere instruments for revenge. The Hindu Right, which had stayed away from all anti-colonial movements, nonetheless adored the idea of a reified nation, and the worship through violence that the Santans visualised. The RSS insists that "Bande Mataram" is the authentic national anthem. They sing every word of it in their daily training centres. They consider any alteration or abbreviation of it a mutilation of the sacred body of the Motherland. The song symbolises and celebrates their idea of a Hindu nation.

I have tried to suggest all that the RSS would find worth appropriating in the novel which it reveres. I have also tried to suggest subtexts in the novel that counterpoint and exceed such deployment. The RSS's exaltation of the text and the hymn evacuates them of all the other possibilities that are fleetingly but intensely evoked in a novel overlaid with strident and violent messages. Those fleeting possibilities relate to a subcurrent of recognition that persists from Bankim's earlier work and seeps like a faint trickle into *AM*: the importance of just being human.

# 2

## The Woman as Communal Subject

### The Rashtrasevika Samiti and the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement

THE RASHTRASEVIKA SAMITI, the little-known women's wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is not an isolable unit complete within itself, but one tied to a whole nexus of interrelated communal institutions. The purpose of the present essay is to see it in relation to the Ram Janmabhoomi upsurge: how and how much the Samiti contributed to it, what new turns the movement imparts to the Samiti, and what possibilities the connection holds for the present phase of Hindu communalism.

One of the most sinister features of the recent Hindutva movement has been the foregrounding of the militantly communal Hindu woman in a variety of unprecedented ways. Rural women in Bhagalpur in 1989 and upper-middle-class Maruti-driving women in Ahmedabad in 1990 have appropriated active roles on the centrestage of riot scenes where they would rarely put in an appearance before – an ironic inversion of the woman's traditional invisibility. According to the Vishva Hindu Parishad

(VHP) reckoning, conveyed to us at their Ramakrishnapuram office, Delhi, in February 1991, 20,000 *karsevikas* (women functionaries) courted arrest on 4 January 1991, and a total of 50,000 were involved in the entire December–January 1990–1 round of satyagrahas. The VHP fortnightly *Hindu Chetna* of 15 December 1990 displays a cover photograph of karsevikas sporting the saffron headband. The caption says: *Matrishakti ka abhyuthhan* (Rise of the Mother's Power). Its Ayodhya office has been selling works by women poets, such as *Shraddha Suman Mala*, which celebrates sacrifices by the mothers and wives of martyrs. An official VHP account of the October/November 1990 events, the *Amar Shaheed* pamphlet, accords particular importance to the arrest of the Bharatiya Janata Party politician Vijayraje Scindia. If *Kakhakra*, a Hindi VCR newsmagazine, focuses long and pointedly on the victim figure of a lone woman resister being dragged away by the police on 30 October 1990, then the woman as dynamic leader is highlighted by *Newstrack*, covering the October events, where Vijayraje Scindia is striding purposefully between two senior and enormously respectful police officers towards a car. From inside the car she is shown again as leaving messages for the future conduct of the movement. VHP office-bearers in Delhi spent a long time animatedly explaining to us the precise differences in the quality of speech between Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambhara. And finally, and most obviously, if L.K. Advani and his *rath* (chariot) were earlier the visual emblems of the Ram Janmabhoomi, the voice and words that fixed its message were those of a woman.

Nor is this phenomenon a flash in the pan. In fact, what seems apparent is the working out of a strategy whereby the Bharatiya Janata Party has located women, along with Dalit Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs), as their primary

target area for the next elections and, for the first time, has formed a new group of full-time women cadres to work for them. I argue here that the new communal phase enables the woman's self-constitution as active political subject in dangerously unprecedented ways.

Does it then indicate that it is somehow more enabling than the left women's movements? Since this is not the place to analyse the left record, I shall make an obvious point now, to which I shall return later. The left and radical women's movement as a whole (and this has been the most powerful form of organised women's movements in India) is not impressive simply in its social and geographical reach, organisational strength, and range of concerns. It also constitutes one of the most serious challenges to the combined and interrelated powers of patriarchy, class, caste, and the state. The Hindu communal groundswell on the other hand, has been restricted largely to urban Uttar Pradesh (UP), and to predominantly high-caste and middle-class milieus – as even the VHP's activists admitted to us. At the same time, the strength of the new phenomenon must not be underestimated. Karsevikas have been mobilised from the most traditionally conservative backgrounds – the upper-class, middle-rank service sector and trading families. The very limits of the movement may then be taken as signs of strength within a different kind of reading. Nor can we draw false comfort from any illusion that these women are not speaking their own minds, their own words. An interviewer,[1] speaking to a bunch of male satyagrahis, was for some time faced with an array of archaeological-cum-historical arguments as well as the standard RSS definition of Bharat as *pitribhumi*, *matribhumi*, *punyabhumi*, and *karmabhumi*

[1] Conveyed to us at their Ramakrishnapuram office, Delhi, in February

(fatherland, motherland, holy land, and land of destiny). Then Chandravati, a woman from Aligarh, excitedly broke into the conversation and introduced a very different note: "*Yahan aye hai khoon barsane ke liye . . . mandir ka arth mulla ko phansi lag jai . . . Mulayam aur VP ko phansi lag jai . . .*" (We have come here to shed blood . . . the meaning of temple building is that mullahs should be hanged, Mulayam and VP [Singh] should be hanged). The whole discussion was subsequently shifted to a markedly more violent plane. Nor does it mean that women voiced mere mindless abuse. Each of the karsevikas interviewed – VHP as well as non-affiliates – played a distinctive individual variation on the themes of Ram Janmabhoomi and Hindutva. For Vijay Dube, a would-be *sanyasini* (female ascetic) from Ghaziabad, Hindutva implied a sweeping, millenarian vision of collectivity (*samashtii*). *Yah [Hindustan] samudra jaise gambhir hai, akash jaise vyapak hai . . . Hindu hi adi ant hai.* (It [India] is as deep as the ocean, as endless as the sky . . . the Hindu is the beginning and the end). Unlike other religions it is not time-bound but eternal. It is not an individual but a collective experience. It finds its centre of gravity in Ram Janmabhoomi, which is then expressed as *Hamara sarvaswa hai, dharam ki bat nahin hai, sarvasarvaswa hai* (It is everything to us, it is not just a matter of religion, it is all, it is everything to us). With the liberation of Ayodhya, *Poora vishwa badal ho javega, ek naya shrishti ka nirman hoga* (The whole world will change, a new creation will come into being). For Mithilesh Vashisht, a VHP worker from Modinagar, on the other hand, the value of the movement lay in the assertion of strength and self-respect against oppression: *Atyachar, anyay nahin sahenge, kisi chees ki seema hoti hai* (We will not tolerate oppression and wrongs, everything has its limits). Another (unidentified) woman intervened with a more poetic-mythical version of the necessity:

"*Yah hamara ang hai, hamara abhushan hai . . . Krishna bhagwan ka chakra hai*" (This is a limb [in our body], an ornament . . . it is the *chakra* of Krishna Bhagwan). All karsevikas were bursting with speech, with arguments and descriptions, and each had an accent very distinctively her own. Within an as-yet limited social and geographical scope then, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement seems to have enabled major breakthroughs in women's political self-activisation not available to earlier communal upsurges. The relevant parallel seems to be with phases within Gandhian mass movements, or the final stage of revolutionary terrorism in Bengal when an intensely devotional form of patriotism admitted women as full-fledged activists.

In a curious way the present movement inverts the usual pattern of symbolisation within national and earlier communal movements. So far, in both, the fetishised sacred or love object to be recuperated had been a feminine figure – the cow, the abducted Hindu woman, the motherland. When we interviewed B.L. Sharma, secretary of the VHP Indraprastha unit in April 1990, he wove an entire anti-Muslim tirade around the figure of the endlessly raped or threatened Hindu woman. Sanatan Dharmi and Arya Samajist office-bearers extended the image to that of a perpetually exposed and endangered motherland. Here, however, the occupied janmabhoomi (lit.: land of one's birth) belongs specifically to a male deity, and women are being pressed into action to liberate it and restore it to him, to bring honour back to Rama. Rama's army of monkeys and squirrels has now acquired a new combatant and Sita's sex is coming to the rescue of Rama, in an inversion of the epic narrative pattern where Rama and his army had to go and bring Sita back. The reversal of roles equips the communal woman with a new and empowering self-image. The woman has stepped out

of her purely iconic status to take up an active position as a militant.

In this context, the very careful and significant handling of the baby Ramlala image acquires new meaning. Stalls in Ayodhya sell a large number of stickers and posters depicting a chubby infant baring his pink gums in a toothless smile. Local legend has it that, in 1949, just before the deity miraculously reinstalled itself within the mosque, a police constable had found a dark and lovely child playing by himself in that corner: the homeless baby had come back home to claim his patrimony. The VHP video cassette produced by J.K. Jain, the *Bhaye Prakat Kripala*, reproduces the event over a long time, with the child within the mosque displaying himself in a variety of cute poses and eventually stringing a bow. We must remember that the Ramayana and the Ramkathas resonate with the many losses of Rama: he loses his kingdom, his father, he is separated from his mothers and his brothers, and then he loses Sita – this is a figure bathed in tears, a reason perhaps why the common man and woman can identify more with him than with other mythical heroes. The entire series of deprivations has now been collapsed into the shape of that irresistible human idol, the deprived male infant. Over and above that, within the mosque and next to the main deity is an icon of the crawling Ramlala, a posture traditionally associated with the baby Krishna and linked to a long chain of associations with emotional and aesthetic structures.

While the appeal of the homeless baby is a general one, it is especially poignant for women. Readings of recent events that insist on a monolithic militarisation of Hinduism by present iconic trends therefore miss out on the versatility which is their most remarkable feature. While the Ramlala appeals to the mother in the woman, the warrior Rama probably simultaneously arouses a response to an aggressive male sexuality.

All this is a relatively new development. Up to the middle of 1990, well after the *shilanyas* (foundation-laying) ceremonies and their attendant riots were over, there was practically no literature by women that either the VHP or the RSS offices sold regularly. VHP news-sheets that covered *shilapujan* (stone-worship) and shilanyas ceremonies gave no space to women's writings. Even Rithambhara's cassette's invocations to rise and fight are addressed exclusively to men: *Birbhaiyon jago!* (Brave brothers, awake!). Her speech obviously targets women listeners as well. There are intimate references to domestic politics among mothers, sisters, and daughters-in-law, to women's work within the home. Yet each time the call for action is issued, it is addressed to brothers: "You have to make yourselves into a clenched fist, my brothers." Inspirational feminine examples relate to motherhood: how Bhagat Singh's mother was found crying after his death not because she had lost her son but because she had no other son to be martyred. Even the Rani of Jhansi is invoked as the mother of a brave patriot. It is true that the *Bhaye Prakat Kripala* cassette inserts the warrior figure of a queen as an adversary of Babur, and within the contemporary movement Sadhvi Rithambhara, Satyavani, and Vijayraje Scindia are endowed with an exalted position. They are, still, exceptional and rare figures.

Up to this point, then, women are still the productive womb, mothers of heroes. Their presence was minimal on the crucial days of 30 October and 2 November 1990. At the Rashtrasevika Samiti office I was told quite frankly that the decision to train karsevikas was the result of an internal debate eventually won by younger Samiti members.

A recent clear shift thus represents new possibilities and problems for Hindu communalism. Communal organisations have not allowed a demonstratively public or even a very active political role to women so far. The RSS is – and this is a very

significant fact – an exclusively male organisation. When Lakshmibai Kelkar approached Hedgewar in 1936 with an appeal to admit women as members, she was refused and Hedgewar later helped her to set up a parallel but separate organisation with a small yet significant difference in name: the members of the RSS are Rashtriya Swayamsevaks while members of the women's wing are Rashtrasevikas. There have been debates within the RSS about giving membership to women, but so far the Sangh has remained uncompromisingly male. The Rashtrasevika Samiti has kept a remarkably low public profile through the six decades of its existence. Even though it is one of the oldest women's organisations in the country, its total membership is now about 100,000 and largely restricted to traditional RSS and BJP bases – Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh. The Delhi wing was formed in 1960 and now includes about 2000 Samiti members. Its *shakhas* (branches) are located almost entirely in middle-class areas: Karolbagh, Patel Nagar, Janakpuri, Naraina Vihar, R.K. Puram, Lajpat Nagar, Kamla Nagar. Volunteers come from enterprising trading families or from middle-ranking government service backgrounds. The VHP Mahila Mandal, which started operating in Delhi from the 1980s, has about 500 members. The two mass fronts of the VHP – the Bajrang Dal and the Durga Vahini – are strictly segregated. The growth in spatial, numerical, and social terms has been quite low compared to the Delhi-based radical women's organisations which have come up much later, or to mass women's organisations under left political parties. The All India Democratic Women's Association, linked to the CPI(M), was founded in 1981 and now has a membership of about twenty-nine lakhs, overwhelmingly rural in composition. The Janawadi Mahila Samiti, its Delhi branch, has about 15,000 members, with large bases in labouring areas. The comparison is

relevant since the VHP Mahila Mandal and the Rashtrasevikas also, unlike other radical voluntary women's organisations, work in close collaboration with an electoral party and a number of affiliated mass organisations.

What does the apparent contrast between the austere reserve of the organisations and the flamboyant wave of a militant reclaiming of public spaces by women denote? Is it a break, a total departure, or the culmination of a long-drawn-out strategy? Or is it a consciously planned extension that stretches out old boundaries?

## II

We could approach this problem through an extended reference to the familiar cassette of Sadhvi Rithambhara. One remembers that voice only too well: high-pitched, shrill, breathless, delivering a non-stop harangue with no modulation. The voice seems always almost about to crack under the sheer weight of passion. The overwhelming and constant impression is one of immediacy, urgency, passion, spontaneity. For over sixty minutes extreme stress is continuously conveyed and the speech seems improvised, as if on the field of battle, an inspired voice speaking recklessly from the gut. The later ban would heighten the earlier impression of impending martyrdom, while legends about the "martyrs" of 30 October and 2 November 1990 would subsequently feed back into the effects of the cassette. The cassette, then, is not a finished product but one that grows with events. New technology opens up unprecedented audio-visual possibilities for political messages and stretches the boundaries of orality. The startling impact of the original speech becomes simultaneously preserved and fixed and can duplicate its own

efforts endlessly to ever-growing audiences at will in changed political conditions. Preserving and replaying the human voice and the spoken word has a different impact from re-reading a written text. Re-reading grows and acquires new meanings over time but remains an individual exercise, a private act. The spoken word addresses whole congregations and proceeds through a continual interchange of passion between speaker and listeners. New technology is able to recapture that exchange *ad infinitum* for freshly or differently constituted congregations. Simultaneously it allows the first message to batten on new meanings and associations gathered from the movement it has helped unleash, growing from its own self-fulfilling prophecies. Rithambhara's words on martyrdom will have much enlarged and transformed meanings for people listening to them after 30 October 1990.

The technology naturalises the intended effect and so thoroughly covers its own traces that we forget we are listening to recorded speech, and not even the live recording of an actual speech. That sustained high pitch and non-stop delivery is impossible to improvise without breaks or modulation. It is a studio composition, an artefact which, with meticulous deliberation and co-ordination, pieces together over long stretches a carefully rehearsed address. The greatest success of technology lies neither in preservation nor in duplication but in its naturalising abilities, in its self-effacement.

Without drawing an exact and mechanical parallel, and without reducing the movement to mere contrived effect, we can still relate the impression of spontaneous militancy to an elaborate and finely tuned institutional structure and shared ideological stockpile that tie together a wide range of party, mass fronts, and movement-oriented bodies to the apex body, the RSS. Each individual organisation – the BJP, the VHP, and

their various fronts – has developed its own distinctive thrust area and all have internally circulating members. A senior VHP Mahila Mandal leader has recently gone over to help out with BJP Mahila Mandal work. Rashtrasevikas claim to have trained the Durga Vahini for the *karseva* (religious service), though the latter is affiliated to the VHP. Almost all BJP women MPs are members of the Rashtrasevika Samiti. The co-ordination, in fact, stretches beyond the core institutional cluster. Rashtrasevikas are offered hospitality for their training camps by Sanatan Dharam temples and DAV schools. The Samiti is closely associated with a chain of nursery schools run by the Saraswati Shishu Mandir. The VHP headquarters at Ramakrishnapuram houses one such school. The school at Naraina Vihar has a very distinctive visual plan and layout. Instead of pictures of flora and fauna or of the nursery tales that usually decorate nursery schools, its walls display on one side frescoes of Hindu historical heroes locked in battle against Muslims. On the other are portraits of Hindu freedom fighters with appropriate messages inscribed below. The central building has the map of Akhand Bharat draped around the figure of Bharatmata and the entire "Bande Mataram" hymn inscribed below it. The DAV school on Aurobindo Marg has an almost identical visual display.

An intricate and delicately balanced system of interlocking personnel, functions, and interests is ultimately monitored by the apex parent organisation, the RSS. The Sangh calls itself a family, not a political organisation. As proof of this it says all its members are equal and uniform in dress, disposition, and functions. This stems from a remarkably peculiar notion of a family, since there cannot be a family without women in it, nor can a family show undifferentiated functions and habits. Only by developing a women's wing, then, does the family metaphor

acquire plausibility. The Rashtrasevika Samiti was, after all, the first affiliate that the RSS helped to foster, even if a good eleven years after its own foundation.

The family model is not just a metaphor. All Samiti members that I spoke to had male relatives in the RSS. In fact the marked ease and self-confidence that animate the very vocal participation of even junior office-bearers in a discussion with elders is partly explained by the status of male relatives within the Sangh. This might carry greater importance than the order of ranking within the Samiti itself. Within the Delhi VHP Mahila Mandal, too, the three top figures are all married to VHP leaders.

The organisational principles of the Sangh provide the pattern for the Samiti. It does not have internal elections and the *pramukh sanchalika* (head woman) nominates her successor. Office-bearers are selected by senior members. Samiti *pracharikas* (female workers) are unmarried women, repeating the accent on celibacy that characterises RSS *sarsanghchalaks* (functionaries), all of whom so far have been bachelors.

A lot of RSS ritual is also replicated within the Samiti. The strict and detailed code of regulations for setting up and disbanding the daily shakha, the physical and martial arts training (the Samiti provides lessons in yoga, sword and *lathi* play, judo and stengun fights), regular *boudhik* (ideological) discussion and the discipline and protocol within shakha programmes are common to both. Whereas the RSS observes six annual festivals – five of which are connected with traditional religious events and the sixth, the Shivaji Utsav, is a Hindu nationalist celebration – the Samiti observes five and omits the non-traditional festival. The major hymns are also more or less the same and are recited individually as well as collectively in exactly the same order. Alongside, a fine tension exists between vociferous claims to

complete autonomy and pride in sharing the RSS heritage. Viduhshi, a young office-bearer, told me rather defiantly that the two bodies are totally distinct, like two railway lines which run parallel yet are always separate. Her analogy comes straight from Golwalkar. In a different sense, too, as we shall see, the Samiti supplements certain kinds of Sangh work, in a way thereby reiterating the conventional place of the Hindu *dharampatni* (devoted wife) within the household – a related yet subordinate sphere.

In the boudhik sessions within the Samiti I came across the same finished structures of thought, the same basic themes on which variations are played by Rashtrasevikas, the BJP, the VHP, individual karsevaks and sevikas, and loose fragments of which have come to constitute parts of popular common sense among non-affiliated informal support groups for a Hindu Rashtra. Resonances of such views or values are heard even in the very different and far more rarefied academic atmosphere of sections of the radical right and the radical left. The RSS occasionally plugs into a whole range of otherwise radical issues – ecology, world peace, interrelated critiques of Western materialism, and monolithic notions of truth that lead to the imperialist suppression of non-Western identities.

Here I shall take up a single theme which I heard being expounded at a Samiti training camp, and about which I read up in Samiti and RSS literature This was the symbolism of the *bhagwatdhwaj* (saffron flag) which is ritually worshipped at the beginning and end of each shakha. The discourse starts with the unique philosophical concept of tolerance within Hinduism – *Sarva dharma soma bhava* – which celebrates pluralism and the many equally valid ways of reaching god. This very pluralism and tolerance, however, characterise a single national ethos which is essentially Hindu and to which all immigrant religions

have adapted themselves. The notion of an essentially Hindu national ethos came under attack when "fanatic" Muslim rulers ruled the land and tried to destroy it with "brute strength". The British, however, "planned to subvert" the Hindu mind itself. This was achieved through a seemingly superior and successful mode of Western knowledge which induced self-forgetting and substituted alien categories of thought for self-knowledge. The perception of a single national ethos was broken up and Indian history was restructured to prove that the nation simply means a geographical space inhabited by different but equal communities, each with its separate ethos. This false and alien notion of secularism destroyed the single shared culture and fractured the sense of wholeness, led to communalism and violence, and eventually culminated in Partition. The Sangh aspires to recuperate that essential wholeness through its struggle for Hindu Rashtra. As an RSS pamphlet puts it, "Vishal Hindu Bharatiya Samaj *bhavi swayam sevak . . . sangh samaj me sangathan nahin, samajkasangathan hai*" (The Sangh is not an organisation within society, it is the organisation of society).

The narrative constructed runs thus: Our true history today is folded back into certain symbols that have resisted Western distortion. The saffron flag, used in the past by Maharana Pratap and Shivaji, is one of them. At the National Flag Committee deliberations, even Maulana Azad had accepted it as our national flag, but Nehru, alienated wrong-headed secularist that he was, refused. Yet another symbol is the Bande Mataram hymn which captures the essential shape of Bharatmata, and for that reason must be recited in its entirety, *akhand* recitation being the equivalent of Akhand Bharat. For the same kind of reason this hymn had been substituted by *Jana gana mana* as our national anthem, which Rabindranath had actually composed to welcome George V.

This whole story, a complete fabrication, was reiterated by a whole range of Samiti members with absolute assurance. Somewhat like the Sangh, but much more emphatically, the Samiti leaves alone charity or social welfare work and has no interest in union activities. Numerical expansion and extensive mobilisation have not, then, so far been the primary concerns, which explains their low growth rate. The Samiti is an intensive physical and ideological training centre out of which a small group of handpicked cadres is regularly selected and sent out to circulate among the affiliated organisations and movements.

That kind of intensive mobilisation works best during its first formative phase within a same-class situation where recruits and teachers do not constantly need to break down boundaries within their own disposition and habits in order to communicate and interact with one another. Mobilisation is then horizontal, unlike the vertical spread of radical women's organisations which reach out to less-privileged sisters as soon as they form themselves. The breadth of the latter's concerns and connections is undoubtedly their greatest strength, yet the Samiti does, perhaps, score over them by the greater initial ease of interaction among all its members. A VHP worker described the Sangh–Samiti combine as engaged in "class work" rather than mass work. Class here refers to a classroom situation where all participants usually share the same social milieu. The description is quite precise since the training is pedagogical in a very total sense. Not just the arguments, but an entire mode of arguing, a particular disposition, is slowly nurtured within the person, leaving a distinct mark on the more engaged activists – a calm, quiet confidence, an unhurried, patient, and seemingly reasonable exposition which proceeds by agreeing with the other person as much as possible and then gently suggesting and building up its own basic themes.

For the Samiti, the daily shakha is not the sole or even the most major form of activity. The family concept is extended to cover members' families in a number of ways. The Samiti's guardianship role in the case of unmarried girls is carefully meshed with an acknowledgement of the primary rights of the family. If the family obstructs the girl's desire for further studies, a particular profession, or a late marriage, the Samiti at first tries persuasion. If this fails completely, the family's decision stands. The same policy is followed over problems of the girl's boyfriend or self-choice in marriage. Rekha Raje, a pracharika, hastened to assure me that the Samiti tries to fill up their time with "healthy" pursuits, and therefore such problems rarely arise. If they do, the Samiti first inspects the boyfriend. Once he is found suitable it then tries to persuade the family. Again, it is the family which must ultimately decide and on no account should the girl be encouraged to disobey.

The prospects of persuasion are enhanced and problems of divided loyalties averted by regular visits to the girl's home and the systematic cultivation of warm personal connections. A young member told me that they make a point of visiting each other's homes and dropping in for tea whenever they happen to pass that way so that the entire family is included within the circle of Samiti solidarity. *Adhyapikas* (women teachers) from the shakha go over regularly to discuss a member's behaviour and prospects with her relatives. The Samiti is then carried right into the heart of the domestic space and ceases to be an institution within the public sphere. Even if the girl's own connections with her shakha snap for some reason, durable contacts have been made with the parental family and the zone of influence permanently expanded. For small towns where individual Samiti workers find it difficult to keep a shakha going, the Samiti sends instructions every three

months to keep the member posted on Samiti developments, the rituals to be observed within this period, and how to informally widen a base among women of her acquaintance. At Khurja in west UP, Prabha Aggarwal, from a staunch RSS family, managed to set up a shakha which recruited fifty members. A scandal involving a local BJP pracharak, however, made some parents withdraw their daughters from the shakha. Prabha now follows the "correspondence course" of posted instructions and spreads the message about Samiti festivals and rituals on a home-based format. The local Saraswati Shishu Mandirs do the rest of the work in the school premises.

Solidarity and warm support are more actively expressed when Samiti members take turns cooking and nursing at times of major illness in a member's house. The shakhas have a strictly local character and these gestures gain them strong roots in the entire neighbourhood. When a girl marries into a non-RSS family and her new domestic situation prevents active shakha work, senior shakha members regularly visit her in-laws and strike up a close relationship with them. The married girl then acts as a pivot within a new domestic set-up, a new neighbourhood. The Samiti in fact encourages her to drop shakha work for the first few years after her marriage, until her status in her new home is firmly established and her Samiti friends are accepted by the entire family. If, however, the in-laws still discourage a connection with the old shakha, she is again advised to not assert her choice. Her old Samiti members of the local branch keep in close touch with her and her family. She is given a few easy exercises that can be done even within a fairly crowded home and is told to teach them to women relatives in her new family. She is also advised to establish herself as an ideal counsellor and arbiter for women within the family. Once that position is secured, she

can informally discuss the ideas she has been trained in during her shakha days or those with which Samiti members have kept her in touch.

One can see how useful such a loose and informal network is in inculcating notions of Hindutva and Hindu Rashtra over a long period of time, and then to swiftly link them with a violent agitation which finds a ready support base without any direct and immediate organisational investment. Gradually, her reputation as a dependable adviser and friend in need will spread to women in the neighbourhood, enlarging and stabilising a circle of dependents and listeners. For women within the kinship network and immediate neighbourhood, the presence of such a woman ensures an informal forum for the discussion of general topics. This way she fills a crucial gap and appeases a very real hunger for serious intellectual discussion among women of the kind that, traditionally, only religious topics had once provided them.

Women's religiosity is usually explained in terms of certain emotional, cultural, or social needs. A very vital function of religion is hardly taken into account: that religion alone gives her access to a world of meanings enclosed in epics, allegories, and related texts that she can interpret and dwell on, thereby transcending the limited experience offered by her immediate and closed world. In part the Samiti continues these themes and alongside weaves them into a different and larger political fabric. A Haryana housewife-activist told me that for her the Samiti's highest value lay in exposing her to a world of thought beyond household and personal matters. Golwalkar had seen the considerable potential in such household-cum-neighbourhood circles for women who worked for the Sangh, and these possibilities have been much extended since his time.

Informal training for unaffiliated wives of RSS activists is

yet another important field for Samiti work. At a Samiti training camp a whole session was reserved for them, followed by a joint lunch and a group discussion of their problems and possible activities. I found that the wives were as familiar with Samiti activists and activities as any formal member. I met the schoolteacher-wife of an RSS activist who had been married five years, before which she had had no contact with that organisation. Now, even though she is not herself a member, she manages single-handedly to persuade her entire body of colleagues to join a day-long protest fast at Ajmal Khan Park after the 30 October events. Her account of the Samiti and the Sangh was as detailed and as confident as that of any activist's. Her work, she told me, was diverse. She had to diligently coach her two tiny children in the daily Sangh mantra recitations and cultivate proper *samskaras* (inclinations) in them. She, like other RSS wives, makes a point of bringing them over to Samiti ceremonies as much as possible so that it becomes a second home for them. Another function is to help needy RSS families in her neighbourhood. Her husband, for instance, tells her if any of these indigent neighbouring households is about to get a daughter married. If such a wedding is imminent, all the affluent wives work out the dowry to be collected among themselves and each makes a contribution. They also get together to help out if an RSS member or one in his family happens to need blood. RSS members are required to donate blood and keep certificates of such donations for this purpose – it gives them access to a blood bank in emergencies. Apart from being far-sighted and a practical form of support, this probably fosters the idea of belonging to a blood brotherhood.

In her professional capacity, the wife is expected to gather influence and respect for her ideas and worldview within her workplace. Much of the Samiti's activity is thus informal and directed

at constructing an ideal totalitarian RSS family. The concept of expansion is a family by family, mind by mind building up of the Hindu nation – an incredibly patient and long-term strategy. It is, to stretch a Gramscian concept, a form of hegemony built upon a molecular model.

## III

Is the Samiti then merely filling a space marked out for it by the Sangh for its own purposes? And if so, does not this conclusion contradict something I suggested above, i.e. that the strength of the movement lies in the exhilarating possibilities it creates for certain sections of deeply conservative women, and in seeming to them an expression of their own creativity?

I think that the original parameters worked out by sarsanghchalaks have proved to be flexible and accommodating. The major body of Golwalkar's instructions for women had carved out a sort of a "Lakshmangandi" (boundary line restricting women to a defined area) of faithful motherhood within which the properly instructed mother carefully guards her children from corrupting Western influences and instils in them the right samskaras – filial piety, knowledge of patriotic heroes, religious texts. Rashtrasevikas have travelled a long distance since then without overtly resisting the original instructions. The gap between the original impulse and the new self-definition may or may not open up fissures within the movement, depending on the versatility and suppleness of the Sangh ideology, both of which are considerable.

Somewhat different pulls seem to be working within the Samiti itself, though it would be crude and false to categorise them as potentially feminist versus overtly fundamentalist. Varieties of emphasis, nonetheless, remain interesting. In the first place,

there are somewhat different versions of the origin myth of the organisation. Neither the authorised history of the Samiti nor the accounts of a senior office-bearer and a pracharika mention the fact that Hedgewar was first approached to admit women into the Sangh, that he refused, and that he helped Laxmibai Kelkar to set up a parallel organisation. It is an RSS publication that dwells on this fact, claiming that Hedgewar convinced Kelkar about the problems of a common organisation. Samiti accounts, then, seem to need to push away the fact of that refusal. Again, the official Samiti history has a somewhat different explanation for the Samiti's foundation. It says: "*Hindutva jagaran ka promukh dhyeya tekar is swatantra sangathan ka shubharambha huya*" (With the primary aim of awakening Hindutva, this independent organisation began auspiciously). Rekha Raje, a pracharika, narrated how Laxmibai Kelkar had, on a train journey and in her husband's presence, witnessed a young girl being raped by *goondas* (neighbourhood toughs) – though they were not Muslims, she said in reply to my question. She realised that since Hindu husbands cannot protect their wives, they must strengthen themselves. Whereas the edge in this story is turned against the failures within Hindu society – Hindu male lustful violence and Hindu male cowardice – the official text overlays that version with the broader and more general aim of Hindutva *jagaran* (awakening).

In the self-explanations and self-definitions produced by the Samiti, the primary emphasis is on physical courage and strength, on a trained, hardened, invincible female body. The Sangh too defines such cultivation of the Hindu woman's physical strength as the first principle and then goes on to list the "intellectual grasp of the values of Hindu culture and devotional attachment to the ideals of Hindu womanhood." A Samiti publication puts

it in stronger terms: "*Swasangrakshanksham nari ki samaj me adhik pratishtha hoti hai*" (A woman who is able to defend herself acquires a higher social status). The specific deity which sums up their aspirations is the militant icon of Ashtabhuja Durga, who subsumes Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Kali. Sevikas are meant to meditate in particular on her weapons. They see themselves as full-fledged soldiers in an impending apocalyptic war and their daily pre-meal mantra is translated as – "Our limbs and bodies have been nurtured by our Motherland and we must give them back to her in her service alone." Expounding on this theme Asha Sharma, who is in charge of the Delhi organisation, explained that this binds the notion of sacrifice with that of active warfare. When I asked if it was some kind of a civil war situation that she had in mind, she said that that was a possibility. Certainly, then, the explicit purpose for which the empowered Hindu female body is trained is patriotic war against the Muslim combatant. The large place that the myth of Muslim lust occupies within the general mythology of Hindu communalism also explains the need for self-strengthening.

Yet we must remember the oral version of the origin myth – Hindu goondas raping a girl in the presence of a Hindu husband – and also the reference to the larger status of the *swasangrakshanksham nari* – the woman who can defend herself – within her own social milieu. Defence against and respect within her own environment is then the implicit subtext which might, in everyday calculations, become a more powerful motive force and a more real compulsion than the ultimate political intention of Hindutva jagaran. When we consider the context from within which the Samiti mobilises and trains its women, the force of the immediate compulsion becomes clearer. Sevikas come from upwardly mobile, urban, solvent, trading or

middle-ranking service sectors – a fertile breeding ground for the endemic dowry murders and violence on wives. Women's organisations that deal with huge numbers of divorce and maintenance suits arising in this social terrain are very familiar with the violence and oppression that flourish against women within it. In the big northern cities, even if not in the rich small towns so far, education and professional opportunities for women have come in late and recently, but have come in a big way. Nor are families opposed to women's employment and professional training, these being regarded as a valuable source of additional income. Thrust into public and mixed spaces for the first time, women daily encounter yet new forms of overt or covert sexual discrimination and violence. It is no wonder that the physical training programmes of the shakhas prove extremely attractive to such women, with their promise of a powerful body and its corollary, self-confidence. The body and the mental attitude that it generates comprise a vital shield against gender oppression in domestic as well as public spaces.

We may then assume that, despite the overarching aim of Hindu power, the woman needs also to utilise Samiti facilities to empower herself against her own hostile environment. Problems of the newly mobile professional woman are often discussed in *Jagriti*, the Samiti journal. One article, for instance, describes how the author withstood the offensive behaviour of a police officer who partially undressed in her presence when she went to a police station to report a street accident. Several others take up this theme: how to construct a responsible and fearless woman-citizen and teach her to exercise her civic rights and duties within a chauvinistic world.

Two very different readings of the precise location of the Hindu woman within her own society seem to jostle against

each other within the Samiti. The pramukh sanchalika's speech at the 1990 annual conference insisted that "*Bharat* [read Hindu] *ki nari sarvada se mukt hai*" (The women of India have always been free). An article in *Jagriti* entitled "Rashtra ka Adhar Nari" (Woman is the Foundation for the Nation ) reiterates this conviction and traces a long history of her power within Hindu society from the time of Manu to the current movement. Yet the same issue carries another article, "Nari Jagaran" (Woman's Awakening), where the present women's movement in India (which is not equated with the specifically Hindu movement) is described as a result of and antidote to the generalised oppression of women. Whereas the earlier trend is extremely critical of the global women's movement as a sign of Western corruption, the latter explains and legitimises it. Another article, "Parivartit parivesh me Bharatiya Nari" (The Indian Woman in a Changing Environment), criticises Indian men for obstructing the larger entry of women into politics. It is interesting to see that while the more authoritative statements – such as in Golwalkar, in RSS strictures, and in the Samiti's official accounts – applaud the new Hindu woman for resisting Western modernism, women's own articles, when they deal with their everyday problems and perceptions, are not much concerned with Westernised modernity. In fact, the new Hindu woman-citizen is cast in a mould which is very close to that to be found in bourgeois feminism. *Nari ke sarvangin vikas ke liye uska arthik roop se swatantra hona paramavshyak hai, atah nari ki arthik swatantrata ke liye rozgar me sangrakshan hona chahiye tatha usse sambandhit sabhi mukadamon ke liye mahila nyayadhish chahiye* (In order to attain the comprehensive development of women it is extremely important for them to be economically independent. So, in order to ensure economic independence, they need reservations in employment

and they need women judges to conduct all cases that are related to such issues). The new Hindu woman is therefore a person with professional and economic opportunities, secure property ownership, legal rights to ensure them, and a certain cache of political power to enforce these rights.

How does this woman relate to Hindu tradition? I feel that Hindu tradition exists for her as a deeply cherished yet somewhat remote icon which requires ritual worship but which is seldom brought out for daily use or inspection. There is very little interest in probing it and thinking over what it actually says about gender. In fact, very often the question of religious faith is interpreted as and completely displaced on to the realm of patriotic faith. The greatest triumph of the present communal moment has been to blend *deshbhakti* (nation worship) and Rambhakti (worship of Lord Rama) – two very potent sources of emotional involvement – into a homogenised whole so that adherents use them interchangeably. When our interviewer asked a karsevika, Vijay Dube – who plans to become an ascetic – how Rambhakti has come to mean so much to her, she immediately traced its source back to her childhood experience of the China war and the passions it had aroused within her. Patriotic faith, in her case, was the original impulse that stoked religious passion, and she herself was not aware of any distinction between the two. The process of mutual collapsing works with equal felicity the other way round as well. At Ayodhya, it was the banning of the usual *parikrama* (circular worship) route – a part of normal pilgrimage activity – that turned pilgrims into karsevaks with such ease.

On specific questions of gender within Hinduism, the verdict seems to be unequivocally modernistic. Sati was squarely denounced by all office-bearers. When I asked about voluntary sati, a young activist said with genuine revulsion: "*Woh ho*

*nahin sakta. Aurat jalegi kyoon?*" (It isn't possible. Why should a woman burn?) She went on to explain that she might do it out of "depression and frustration", that is, as a mark of weakness, not as a mark of strength – but neighbours and relatives need then to shore up her will to live.

The Samiti does not in theory ban inter-caste or even inter-communal marriage, provided of course, the family agrees. A *Jagriti* cover-page depicts two helpless women against a black background, crouching in a helpless mourning posture. And out of that dark frame a young, rather grim-faced woman steps out on to the radiant half of the cover with a fiery step and uplifted head. There are no traditional Hindu marks on her body – no *sindur* (vermilion), no veil, no *bindi*. She wears chappals, her sari is draped tightly around her, and her whole stance is free, even aggressive. Of course, she does wear the Samiti uniform, the purple-bordered white sari. A surprising feature of the magazine is its uncompromisingly "non-feminine" choice of themes. It makes no concessions to conventional women's topics. There are no hints on beauty aids, no cookery or embroidery section, no advice on child rearing. Its stories are scrupulously bereft of the romantic element. They deal instead with the romance of Hindu civilisation and that of modern patriotism.

Women's power is a theme discussed and celebrated, often in the most grotesque of circumstances. At the Ayodhya karseva, a crowd of women was chanting the beautiful feminist slogan: *Hum bharat ki nari hain. Phool nahin chingari hain* (We are the women of India. We are not flowers, we are embers). When our interviewer asked them why Sita was absent in the invocations to Rama, the men fell silent but the women had their answers ready. One said that this was Rama's birthplace and not Sita's which accounted for her absence. But Vijay Dube interrupted

her, saying that "Shri" actually means "Sita", and hence, in the chant "Shri Ram", Sita has in fact been placed before Rama. The interviewer asked, "You mean Sita is contained in Rama?" "No" said Dube, "Sita comes before Rama." Not only had thought gone into the location of Sita, there was also a recognition that Sita must come before Rama. In a VHP book for children, *Hanuman ki Kabaddi*, Hanuman declares he is neither Rama's *bhakt* (disciple), nor Sita's, but the bhakt of "Sitaram" alone.

I do not in the least wish to give the impression that a sort of women's liberation is going on happily within a somewhat unfortunate Hindutva framework. When I asked Asha Sharma where the Samiti differs from other women's organisations, her reply was immediate. "We do not believe that in marital disputes the husband is necessarily to blame. When we arbitrate, we do not take the woman's side, we are neutral. We tell the woman that she must do everything to preserve her home life . . . *Hum ghar torne-wali nahin hain*" (We are not home-wreckers).

They offer women no formal legal counselling, nor is divorce encouraged. Dowry is regarded as an evil, yet there is obviously no ban on it among Sangh or Samiti members. If from time to time a demand for full citizenship rights and affirmative action is made in *Jagriti*, there is no critical review of Hindu patriarchy. When karsevikas at Ayodhya were asked if their status would improve within a Hindu Rashtra, one of them said yes – because Muslims then would not be allowed to have four wives, and that would by itself ensure greater respect for women. She could not, on the spur of the moment, think of any other possibility within Hindutva for herself.

The same silence is maintained about caste. It is formally denounced and shakha members are not to submit their surnames when they enrol, so that their caste status does not become public

knowledge. There is also community dining to ensure the absence of barriers. Yet the caste system is not a theme for discussion or criticism in boudhik study sessions. As with gender, class struggles are yet another field of resounding silence and non-involvement.

## IV

Where do we feminists stand in relation to this manifestation of women's power? There is no denying that it does empower a specific and socially crucial group of middle-class women, if not in an absolute feminist direction then surely in a relative sense. It helps hitherto home-restricted women to reclaim public spaces, to acquire a public identity; it confers upon them a political role and even leadership. It teaches the woman to regard herself not as merely feminine but as a full-fledged citizen. It gives her access to serious intellectual cogitation.

We know the costs too. The public identity is regimented, colourless, grim. Intellectual discussion and political involvement have reached their fulfilment in a violent campaign of blind hatred, and not in a critique of class, caste, and patriarchy. Everything is calculated to prepare the woman to be a citizen of an authoritarian Hindu Rashtra, a help in wrecking secular, democratic politics.

This paradox of self-limiting and violent self-empowerment must not be appropriated within currently fashionable, flat, and facile critiques of post-Enlightenment modernity which read Hindutva as yet another problematic manifestation of a necessarily distorted Westernist discourse and seek a resolution for it within a so-called unproblematic, accommodating, warm, and generous Hindu tradition – in a shift from modernistic Hindutva to traditional Hinduism. Socialists and feminists can see no

resolution for caste, class, or gender issues within tradition, nor can they afford the luxury of ascribing all present distortions to an abstract notion of colonial discourse. In any case, the specifically modernistic elements in the communalism of Hindu women are hardly ones that they can identify as sources of distortion or recommend the abolition of. The Samiti's verdict on sati would be an obvious example. The real problems lie in the realm of active politics, the resolution lies with more aware and sensitive forms of left democratic and feminist movements alone.

# 3

# Pragmatics of the Hindu Right

## The Politics of Women's Organisations

I START WITH A rather obvious methodological and conceptual distinction to convey my discomfort with current critiques of the Hindu Right, as well as explain some seemingly obvious points about the ideology. The distinction I have in mind is between identity and display. Identity relates to the nature or essential characteristics of a particular kind of politics. Display refers to the rhetorical tropes, representational strategies, and ideological manoeuvres. As far as the Hindu Right is concerned, we all seem to understand its identity even without having done much research into its social composition. The Hindu Right is assumed to be the agent of the Indian bourgeoisie that activates lumpen elements from time to time in order to defend the interests of global and Indian capitalism – the latter also subsuming within itself a hefty dose of feudal elements; and it is also assumed to have identifiable fascistic analogues in other histories. Largely impressionistic or stray journalistic data, or even suppositions that require no

footnoting, suffice to make us assume all this.[1] And once we know the identity, the display becomes irrelevant – at most a mask, a lie, a cover that can be taken neatly off the book without damage to what lies within. All that we need then to say about the self-display is to point out factual irregularities and inconsistencies, or to dismiss it as ideological mystification.

I do not quarrel so much with the substantive conclusions of such critiques as with their methods. They suggest a certain laziness, a state of easy contentment with a range of a priori generalisations. Without the different facets of its identity, and without a deep probing of the functioning of the display, the Right looks like a somewhat timeless and featureless construct into which we pour all that we do not like. This can be post-Enlightenment modernity and godless secularism for some, or Indian capitalism and post-modernist excess for others. Or else the Right is dissolved into violence as a transcendental analytical category, scrubbed of political particularities and stalking across time and space with innate, fixed tendencies and drives of its own that defy social, historical, or political determination. The submergence of the Right into violence of this kind makes it an existential rather than political problem. Violence becomes the subject, the proper noun that activates the verbs, the actions.

[1] This does not mean that scholarly research does not exist, merely that it is not much looked into, not even by those who make authoritative critical statements. For more substantial work, however, see among others Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s*, New Delhi: Viking, 1996; Eva Hellman, *Political Hinduism: The Challenge of the Visva Hindu Parishad*, Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1993; and for a detailed exposition of the corporatisation of religious interests, Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Indian men and women become mere sites and props in a theatre through which violence moves and speaks, while the Right itself recedes from our horizon of concerns, the search for its specific history endlessly deferred.

I will deploy a simple example to try and place identity and display in a different relationship with each other. We all know that the Right is opposed to the equalising of entitlements, hence the question of poverty does not interest it at all. Given this basic identity, we dismiss all that it may say about poverty-alleviation measures as simple hypocrisy. Let us, however, assume that, up to a point, it says a lot on the matter – without, of course, acting on what it says. If we then notice that it has stopped discussing the question of poverty altogether – and moreover if it goes on to say that such questions distract from the primary concerns of national self-strengthening and so must not be raised – do we not then conclude that its fundamental strategies have taken a new turn and that it has entered a new phase of its history? And does that not then indicate a shift in its identity? And do we then not need to explore what activated its earlier self-display, i.e. its concern with poverty, and why that has now become unnecessary or threatening? In other words, we then have to assume a structural relationship between self-display and identity, and we need to look closely at both. We also need to see how they interanimate each other.

## II

Having outlined the need to look at the Right's nature and self-representation seriously – to consider the thing itself – I shall briefly veer away to look at certain antecedents. These are not direct lineages as such, they are more like ingredients that slowly

cohere over time. I will then consider the specific and distinctive ways in which the Right negotiates with this context through its particular modes of self-display.

Pundits of modern Indian history have patronisingly allocated the entire sphere of women's history to a "lower" rung of women and feminist historians, as a domain of no great importance in itself. But they have done so at some peril even to their own conception of the important issues of our history. For at the level of concepts and movements a history of Indian women in modern times is also a specifically Indian history of rights. It is also a history of resistance to the discourse of equal rights. In colonial times, some efforts were made to rectify certain extreme aspects of Brahmanical patriarchy that had percolated into the normative worlds of all upwardly mobile segments of the Hindu castes. The mode of intervention was legislative change – most notably in the sphere of banning widow immolation, the legalisation of widow remarriage, and raising the age of consent. For the first time, Hindu marriage was debated and discussed in the public sphere, where a few educated women participated as critical and privileged commentators. Also, for the first time, law-making became a public activity, a transparent process, even when the law was framed by an alien colonial state.

As a result of the public debates within which multiple alternatives jostled against one another, several distinct paradigms pertaining to marriage, the family, and intimate human relationships were articulated. They competed with one another as self-justifications and mutual critiques. If earlier marriage codes and customs – however diverse and plural – were non-negotiable prescriptions given as the fixed and natural order of things, now all alternatives needed to defend themselves in public, in the presence of women, to persuade and convince a diversified public

opinion. Because they needed to convince liberals, the orthodox, and revivalists, all shades of opinion began to go beyond statutory references to scripture and custom in order to claim that their particular alternative safeguarded the woman's best interests; and more, that this alternative best represented the woman's will, consent, pleasure. Of course, most such claims were manipulative and dishonest products of instrumental reasoning. But it is still important to point out that, in the process of such arguments, the woman's will or consent gained acceptance as a new ground for normative constructions.[2]

Neither liberal reformers nor revivalists nor the colonial state articulated the notion of a female selfhood based on an absolute possession of rights. Yet their public arguments created the space for at least a qualified acceptance of the notion of the woman's assent to her prescribed condition. The new ground was reinforced through the emergence of the discourse of political nationalism and its anti-colonial agenda. This developed and refined the concept of self-determination by people as the site for nation formation. Even before Gandhian nationalism and Left anti-imperialism had in their different ways recognised the labouring classes as the privileged subjects of anti-colonial nationalism, nineteenth-century nationalists had begun talking about the innate right and capability of a people to decide on the basic nature of governance. Political nationalism acknowledged self-determination as a moral imperative, if only in the sphere of nation-making.

Hindu revivalism, or cultural nationalism, however, provided a very different moral imperative. Instead of self-determination as

[2] I have discussed these aspects of the debates in Tanika Sarkar, "Moving towards Rights: The Age of Consent Debates in Late Colonial Bengal", *Feminist Studies*, forthcoming.

a right of the female individual or the people, it referred to the uniqueness of the culture of the Hindu "volk". It also referred to the power that the volk or community required over individuals in order to preserve itself from extinction when faced with a different and triumphant cultural system. Here the Hindu woman was allotted a unique responsibility as the repository of past freedom and future nationhood, since the Hindu man had already supposedly compromised his cultural authenticity. On her fixed and unchanging obedience to community prescriptions would depend the life of her tradition and religion. She was therefore the source of authenticity, nation-making, freedom. But this huge political role depended in actual practice on an abdication of all agency and self-determination. The discourses of liberal reformism and political nationalism on the one hand, and of Hindu revivalism and cultural nationalism on the other, can be differentiated from each other on this ground: are people the embodiments of autonomy and self-determination, or of authenticity and culture preservation? Is the woman a rights-bearing individual or a culture-bearing one?

The Hindu Right has inherited this structure of possibilities and problems and it has had to steer a very delicate and difficult course. When it emerged in an enduring, organised form in 1925 as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), political nationalism, Left anti-imperialism, women's movements, and low-caste protest movements had, despite their mutual differences and disputes, already formulated concepts of rights and self-determination. These had entrenched themselves as deeply ingrained values in the political sphere. So hegemonic was this situation that its overt and explicit refutation would have been suicidal for any political interest striving for hegemony and power. The Right's displayed political articulations needed, therefore, to verbally affirm a

democratic, constitutional mode of governance based on notions of universal citizenship rights on the one hand, and on affirmative support to historically disadvantaged groups on the other. Moreover, it had to work within that conceptual framework to adapt its politics to contingencies created by that framework. This meant that a fundamental commitment to the *Manusmriti* could not rely on its authority any longer, and the Right needed instead to publicly genuflect before Ambedkar and occasionally borrow his words – a formidable undertaking! It is interesting how carefully now the Right abstains from public references to Manu. Only at a moment of profound crisis – the anti-Mandal hysteria of 1990 – could the *Organiser* take recourse to ancient sanctions and prescriptions, proving that their venerated texts of power remain deep resources which cannot be overtly displayed in ordinary times.

The formal, or displayed, commitment to a politics of rights does not unduly constrain the Right's authoritarian anti-emancipatory agenda. For it can simultaneously rely on and bring into play another resource that has also come down from the nineteenth century: the intentions and discourses of Hindu revivalism and cultural nationalism. Through its arguments around the Hindu woman's ideal mode of being, nineteenth-century cultural nationalism created a larger theoretical justification not only for the Brahmanical form of conjugality, but, by implication, of the entire complex that is the Brahmanical hierarchical system. This was defended on the grounds of an embattled Hindu cultural and religious identity threatened by Western knowledge, Christian missionaries, and Islam. Revivalistic cultural nationalism tried to reinforce an adherence to this system by branding all projects that had any emancipatory potential, however slight, as borrowed, alien, and as representing a surrender to the colonisation

of culture in the minds of Hindus. Nineteenth-century debates on Hindu conjugality and their larger historical implications for caste, class, the poor, and the dissident are extremely significant. For the assumptions that had been developed about the condition of the woman could serve as a metaphor and protean argument to freeze any discourse of equal rights. The figure of the woman has a central narrative function in the organisation of any discourse of social power, for her condition provides the tropes that can be most usefully deployed to translate power as affect and intimacy. All kinds of hegemonic agendas have relied on this. The gender perspectives of the Hindu Right – especially those of their own women – therefore provide vital clues to the making of ideological interpellation.

The Hindu Right today has been able to skilfully manoeuvre with this inherited tension and debate. When it uses the language of rights seriously, it is to exalt the rights of a religious majority, and only if this majority is made coterminous with its own politics. At the same time, the counterfeit nature of the reference soon becomes evident, for a discourse of rights must include within itself a design for accommodating the rights of all. When it comes to the rights of any kind of minorities, or, what appears to the Right as deviants – religious, political, cultural, or sexual – the Right will not provide a design that is coherent or consistent. What it will do in such contingencies is to cast the very intention of the emancipatory libertarian politics of equal rights into doubt by branding it as an alien interference that dooms the future of Hindu cultural authenticity.

The Hindu Right today stands at a transitional moment in its history when it still tries to hold on to the possibilities generated by both kinds of discourses – rights and self-determination on the one hand, and cultural authenticity on the other. It attempts

a resolution by stitching the two together. Hindus become signs of both weakness and strength – as the majority community, and as threatened culture or as endangered nation. In either capacity, they are to be granted superior rights that preclude generalised notions of equality.

Why, when Hindus are such an overwhelming majority, does the notion of weakness carry such potent resonances within the Hindu Right's cadre base? This is neither some sleight of hand nor an optical illusion, but the consequence of the discourse being received by an upper-caste and middle-class cadre base of the Sangh (as distinct from a far more generalised electoral support base of the BJP) which is acutely aware of its own minuscule size and disproportionate power within the Hindu community. It knows that it is indeed a minority, even if Hindus as a whole are not. Their awareness of real numerical weakness, counterposed to the real material strength of their Sangh's cadre base, creates the grounds for the reception of this multivocal message. We need to note what is actually being attempted by the simultaneous occupation of the two contradictory sites by the same political formation, namely strength as well as terminal weakness.[3] Since the Right, in its claim to represent Hindus, fills up the entire discursive space all on its own, there are groups that disappear from sight: the poor, the low caste, people with non-heterosexual preferences, non-Hindus of any sorts, tribals, and displaced people. Hindus as a whole, rather than these categories, become the marginalised people par excellence, threatened simultaneously by alleged Muslim demographic proliferation and treachery, and by Western cultural onslaught.

[3] On the trope of impending death in the discourse of Hindu communalism, see Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early 20th Century Bengal*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, ch. 2.

The task is obviously not tension-free. The tension forms a language that to secular ears sometimes sounds like either doublespeak or incoherence. In relation to women's conditions, and to the critique of Muslim polygamy, the foregrounding of women politicians of the BJP is aligned with songs of praise for the traditions of Brahmanical Hinduism, and to occasional fundamentalist pronouncements even by women leaders of the Right.[4] Amrita Basu says it is futile to look for any logical structuring behind the incompatible issues, they are dictated by sheer political expediency and decided according to vote banks and constituencies.[5] While this may hold true for the BJP, for the Sangh Parivar as a whole I think it is possible to uncover an underlying logic that is extremely complicated and tortuous but that nonetheless binds the contradictory stances together.

## III

The RSS, founded in 1925, has steadfastly remained an all-male organisation down to this day. Its founder Hedgewar had initially refused to consider the opening of a women's wing. However, in 1936, eleven years after its beginning, the RSS responded to the pleas of Lakshmibai Kelkar, mother of an important Sangh member. A women's wing, the Rashtrasevika Samiti, was founded in 1936 with daily *shakhas* that provided martial arts as well as ideological (*boudhik*) training. It remained however a small and low-key affair. Though it was the second-oldest women's

[4] See, for instance, S. Anitha, Manisha, Vasudha, Kavitha, "Intervention with Women", in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, eds, *Women and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995.

[5] Amrita Basu, "Feminism Inverted: The Gendered Imagery and Real Women of Hindu Nationalism", ibid.

organisation affiliated to a political body, it was overtaken and completely overshadowed by nationalist and Left women's movements. It participated in no mass struggles – anti-colonial or for rights – and was not foregrounded by the RSS in any of its own activities. The second *sarsanghchalak*, M.S. Golwalkar – also the supreme ideological guru of the RSS – saw no reason to specify a distinctive or important role for it within the Sangh complex. His strictures to the women of Sangh families taught them how to run their homes and bring up children with the correct Sangh values. The Samiti was not required to play a significant part in RSS self-fashioning.[6]

Around 1989–90, in a sudden and dramatic spurt of activities, the Sangh Parivar threw into dazzling prominence a large number of women's organisations and women leaders – the BJP Mahila Morcha, the VHP Maitri Mandal, and the Durga Vahini, along with their various regional versions. Thousands of *karsevika*s participated in the attacks on the Babri Masjid and in its demolition, their role being highlighted in Sangh media products, i.e. the Jain Studio video films, the VHP fortnightly magazine *Hindu Chetna*, and Hindi video newsmagazines such as *Kalachakra*. In January 1992, a month after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a women's celebratory demonstration was held at Ayodhya where Sadhvi Rithambhara was a guest of honour.[7] Women were active and prominent in the bloody riots that swept across India in the course of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in Bhagalpur, Ahmedabad, and Bombay.[8] The role

[6] See Tanika Sarkar, "Woman as Communal Subject", in the present volume; and M.S. Golwalkar, "A Call to Motherhood", in idem, *Bunch of Thoughts*, Bangalore: Vikrama Prakashan, 1980.

[7] Interview with Asha Sharma, Delhi, April 1990.

[8] See Teesta Setalvad, "The Woman Shiv Sainik and Her Sister Swayamsevika", in Sarkar and Butalia, eds, *Women and the Hindu Right*, op. cit.

of Rithambhara's audio-cassette speech and Uma Bharati's propaganda tours in stoking ferocious anger and aggression against Muslims was memorable.[9]

As noted in the preceding essay, I did some fieldwork among Delhi-based women of the Hindu Right between 1990 and 1993, when the Sangh Parivar was engaged simultaneously in a mass movement of violence against Muslims and an electoral bid to capture state power at the Centre. This was also the time when for the first time in its history the Sangh began to flaunt its women in public places and roles. It was a special moment, very upbeat and self-confident, a moment of spectacular growth and spread, a phase of mass mobilisation and movements, all of these being new and heady departures for the Sangh and its women. At the Samiti office, office-bearers told me of an internal struggle that had preceded the Samiti's decision to allow and train women as *karsevikas*. They said it had been young members that had forced the hands of the Samiti.

The Samiti was in an excited and hopeful mood, claiming credit for the growth of women's wings and activism.[10] It had launched itself into developing a strong, wide-ranging, and dynamic female cadre base for the Sangh that would enjoy a powerful public identity and political function, and that would also claim equality in political work without overtly claiming social equality. The enterprise was fraught with some tension since political equality already showed a few tentative signs of overspill into the social and the domestic. The Samiti had to its advantage a pedagogical and organisational structure that through institutionalised as well as informal networks and relationships could

[9] In the early 1990s I talked to VHP office-holders at their office in Ramakrishnapuram, New Delhi. They gratefully recalled her signal services to the cause.

[10] Sarkar, "Woman as Communal Subject", op. cit.

develop and thoroughly train an active and engaged cadre base among middle-class, urban, upper-caste women who would spread the networks further down to ensure a much larger electoral base for the Sangh Parivar.

I observed at the time that the Samiti had come a long way from the parameters of pure domesticity laid down by Golwalkar. The women of the Sangh came from conservative, domesticated, urban, middle-class and upper-caste backgrounds. They were now for the first time beginning to go in for some education, and even into jobs and political work. The Samiti trained such women for their newly gained public roles and identities. Although the primary focus remained on women within the home, for a new generation of the more active women it held the hope of self-confidence and competence. I had also observed that these new possibilities had opened up some fractures within the established pattern of work and ideas. The Samiti's journal *Jagriti* reflected deep ambivalences about the women's movements, with the older Sangh leaders warning against their disruptive influence, but with ordinary contributors occasionally identifying themselves with them. There were articles about the woman's empowerment needs against male domination, discrimination, and violence.[11] Young girls from RSS families at Khurjah complained that their political activism was cruelly thwarted by early marriage and the burden of housework from which their families would not exempt them.[12]

The tension, however, was structured by and contained within a generally conservative domesticity – a modernised and

[11] Ibid.

[12] Interviews with women of the *sanghchalak*'s family, December 1991. See Tapan Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993.

somewhat loose and flexible version of Brahmanical patriarchy that allowed and encouraged education, employment, and a more informed and activist politicisation only on the basis of communal violence and commitment to an extremely inegalitarian social perspective. Male discrimination was questioned, if at all, in public spaces and in the workplace, rather than at home.

I found the fieldwork a profoundly disturbing and disconcerting experience. As a feminist, I had always celebrated the release of women from pure domesticity, their politicisation had always been assumed to be an emancipatory possibility, and the relationship between communalism and women had been seen as one of male-inflicted violence and female victimhood. Recent experiences during the fieldwork confounded these fond certainties and forced my thinking into new trajectories.

## IV

The last year of the century finds the Sangh Parivar in significantly changed circumstances. The "mass phase" of this fascistic formation – extremely limited and gestural as it was – is closing down, movements being replaced with rhetoric and even their few feeble populist gestures dying out fast. Designs for expansion, especially among the lower social strata that are not part of the traditional Sangh strongholds, are now replaced with shifting, tactical, and insecure alliances with "low-caste parties". State power, or its very close proximity in a loose coalition with many political groups, has necessitated a sharper differentiation between the electoral front of the BJP and other Sangh affiliates like the Samiti, the VHP, and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch. Much accommodation has been made with globalisation in state policies, and its cultural impact has in particular led to acute discomfort

among the old guard. In short, an unprecedented preoccupation with the grasping of state power and with its maintenance have led to the prospect of a dilution of the old Sangh character, as well as the need to juggle deftly with its different affiliates at different times. Whilst doors had perforce to be opened to new allies, constituencies, and policies hitherto unthinkable for the Sangh, there has been an acute need to also revive and preserve old values and harden old convictions within the Parivar. It is my impression that the women's wing has been entrusted with the conservation of old and inner values.

Going back to the women of the Samiti in April 1999 opened up new sources of disturbance. However, it also brought a few crumbs of comfort. It we feminists had found the communalised public identity of Sangh women disturbing, the Sangh men seemed to have found it even more so – for different reasons. I went back at a moment of deliberate withdrawal of their women's activism and a folding back of the public potential. The women are, with some exceptions that I shall discuss later, being pulled back into their homes. Golwalkar's restricted and restrictive strictures on domesticity and the need for home-bound women have been retrieved and refurbished. The Samiti has been socialised into a less expansive future. I had hesitated to use the word "fundamentalism" in the early 1990s, either about the Sangh's gender ideology or about its women's organisations. I am convinced that the fundamentalist turn is now accomplished. I feel, moreover, that misrecognition was not the reason why I had earlier missed the point. It was on account of what emerged later, latent partly because of the dissonances and paradoxes that I observed at that time. But it has happened above all because of the changed historical situation and its new logic. I shall come back to this later.

Let me, first of all, establish my point about the retreat. The BJP has been in power in Delhi, till fairly recently, for five continuous years. It has ruled for more than a year at the centre. Yet, the Delhi Samiti membership seems to have been halved. It stood, according to Samiti reckoning, at 2000 in 1991. Now the same office-bearers put it at 1000, or a little more. The *shakha*s have decreased from sixty in the past year to no more than fifty-two at present. Though a new recruit, Kanchan, put it at fifty-two, Asha Sharma, "Karyavayika", Delhi, for the past ten years, put it at about fifty fully functional ones. Poonam Gupta, the only full-time *pracharika*, put it at forty-eight. Samiti office-bearers now make a distinction between "regular" and "irregular" *shakha*s that I had not come across in the early 1990s.[13] I had earlier been given to understand that *shakha*s meet twice a day, and now there

[13] A Karyavayika is the organising secretary; Asha Sharma has held this office for the past ten years. She was a founder-member of the Delhi wing in 1960, being then a Mathematics Honours student at Miranda House, the women's college in Delhi University. She now works as a teacher in a school at Sadr Bazar. The Samiti's Prant Karyavayika (general secretary) for Delhi – the person who represents the Samiti in intra-Sangh meetings – is Radha Mehta, an advocate by profession, a much younger person who was appointed to her office last year. The Pramukh Sanchalika (head of the all-India organisation) is Usha Chati, who assumed office in 1994. The Samiti has so far seen three Pramukh Sanchalikas in office, all of them Maharashtrian upper-caste women. All Samiti office-bearers are nominated. The core group consists of twenty-four women, all nominated. Nagpur, where the Samiti was founded, remains the all-India headquarters. In this way, the Samiti replicates the earlier history of the Sangh, which "grew up" in Nagpur and, barring the current incumbent, so far all its Sarsanghchalaks have been Maharashtrian Brahmins. Pracharikas are full-time activists pledged to strict celibacy. Their duties are to supervise the functioning of *shakha*s. Poonam Gupta, a young girl from a hard-core RSS family, is Delhi's only Pracharika at the moment, looking after the West and East Delhi *shakha*s. Senior Samiti

seem to be only two that do so. Most are bi-weekly affairs.[14] The areas of concentration seem to remain the same – those settled by refugees from West Punjab initially, which are now doing very well, or in old and affluent trading or middling service-sector areas, namely Kamala Nagar, Lajpat Nagar, Rohini, Vikaspuri, Punjabi Bagh, Paschim Vihar, Karolbagh, Rajindar Nagar, Moti Nagar. The social catchment areas are the same as for the Sangh, though far less numerous: traders, middle-ranking service people, mostly of refugee origin, i.e. people with bitter memories of Partition and riots that the Samitis do much to keep alive. Poonam Gupta confessed that young girls are not very active, though middling middle-class girls still find the physical training very useful, and older married "ladies" seem much more enthusiastic, so that most popular Samiti timings for *shakha*s are 11 a.m., when middle-class housewives can conveniently gather. Trading and middle-class service-sector families tend to be almost entirely upper caste and office-bearers did not refute my supposition that most of their members are from these circles.

Socially and geographically, there has been stagnation and even decline in Delhi. On an all-India scale, the total membership has remained constant at two lakhs over the past decade, even though the Sangh Parivar has seen a rapid growth in its power. The BJP Mahila Morcha has a membership of around 13 lakhs, but its function is to mobilise women supporters of the BJP for electoral activities.[15] It does not function as a women's organisation. The Mahila Aghadi of the Shiv Sena has no records of

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members teach others. Interviews with Asha Sharma and Poonam Gupta in Delhi, April 1999.

[14] Interviews with Asha Sharma.

[15] See Teesta Setalvad, in Sarkar and Butalia, eds, *Women and the Hindu Right*, op. cit.

members and did not claim much success. It is a very depressed organisation, with a minor status within the Sena apparatus and no links whatsoever with Sena women corporators and legislators. Its office-bearers claim no achievements in recent years, apart from bringing a film, Deepa Mehta's *Fire,* to the notice of Bal Thackeray.[16] Again, the 5000 urban sites that the Samiti covers have remained fairly constant over the decade, with some recent growth in the south and Punjab.

Secular feminists – haunted by the rapid growth of the Right and a sense of guilt arising from failing to stem its growth – sometimes go overboard to declare that the Right has seized the initiative even in the women's movement from the hands of secular forces. This is paranoia, based on an absolute ignorance of facts and figures. In fact, women's movements and organisations are one area where Left and radical forces enjoy an overwhelming edge over the Right, a fact that Left parties perhaps do not want to advertise. The All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) alone has a membership between 50-60 lakhs and it has grown rapidly in the last decade. The bulk of the force is recruited from rural women.[17] Dalit women of the AIDWA have been very active in the movement and the AIDWA too is active among Dalits. Recently, Brinda Karat led an anti-untouchability campaign in Tamil Nadu. The Samiti, on the other hand, admits that they still have to open their account in villages, and that so far they cover only cities and district towns.[18] They had said the same thing ten years back. Obviously, rural, poor, and

[16] Interviews prepared under my instructions and conducted by Ramlath in Mumbai. I am very grateful to her for her in-depth interviews.

[17] Interview with the AIDWA leader Kanak Mukherjee, Calcutta, February 1999.

[18] Interview with Asha Sharma and Kanchan Lalporewala, Delhi, April 1999.

low-caste women are not targeted as part of the potential female cadre base to whom the Samiti brings the full benefits of Sangh education and training. Add to the AIDWA a very large number of autonomous women's organisations across the country that are engaged in radical movements and programmes, and we get numbers that are impressive by any count, certainly breathtaking by Sangh–Samiti standards. We need to remember that the growth in Leftist women's organisations occurred in the teeth of adverse circumstances. While the last decade has been a fortunate one for the Sangh, the Left forces have not done well except in this sector. By contrast, even in Delhi, which has for very long been a Sangh stronghold, the membership stands static at about a thousand. The Left, always very insignificant in the city, numbers about 47,000 in the CPM-affiliated Janwadi Mahila Samiti, more than doubling itself in the last decade, without the benefit of a corresponding growth in the strength of the parent organisation.[19]

The Samiti has, however, two important new growth areas in Delhi. In some trans-Yamuna slums in East Delhi, and in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), the Samiti runs fairly regular *shakha*s among daughters of domestic servants, though the JNU wing is also patronised by some students.[20] It is significant that the areas are strictly segregated, so the middle-class and lower-class segments do not mix with each other. At the same time, it is equally or more significant that for the daughters of domestic servants the Samiti has started full *shakha*s, since these are instruments for creating a cadre base.

In the early 1990s, the Samiti was engaged in a variety of programmes. It ran a fairly substantial monthly magazine, *Jagriti*; it provided orientation courses for wives of RSS men who had

[19] I was informed by Indu Agnihotri of Janwadi Mahila Samiti, Delhi.
[20] Interview with Asha Sharma.

come from non-RSS families and correspondence courses for newly married Samiti members who had joined non-RSS families but who found it difficult to attend *shakhas*.[21] Such courses were also meant for young girls who lived in areas lacking *shakhas*.[22] All these programmes have been discontinued. The only new addition has been to open discussion groups for elderly women.[23] This is obviously a success, but the reasons are interesting. An 85-year-old new recruit, Kanchan, instantly sympathised with Samiti plans for saving the young from Western cultural influences. She has never before been exposed to Sangh politics but fully shares their distaste for the new westernised generations. Does this decline in the possibilities of mobilisation among girls, and the new interest in older women, indicate an interesting retreat from the new generation among the upper and more solvent sections of the middle classes where the Sangh had started recruiting massively during the Ram Janmabhoomi campaigns?

Again the distinction between the cadre base and the electoral base is vital. These upper categories of the middle classes will still vote BJP – but will they come under the hegemonic pedagogic schedule of the Sangh Parivar that the Sangh itself counts as crucial for the making of a Hindu Rashtra? There is evidence of earlier tendencies in that direction. The Ram Janmabhoomi campaigns occurred at the peak of the Sangh mobilisation efforts,

21 Interview with Rekha Raje, Delhi, December 1990.

22 Interviews at Khurjah, op. cit.

23 Kanchan, an 80-year-old woman from Rajasthan, was visiting her daughter in Delhi when the neighbours drew her into such familiar and approved talk. Though lacking previous exposure to the Sangh – and coming, if anything, with Congress leanings – she promptly recognised the validity of the discussions and became a Samiti whole-timer. Currently, she is the "guardian" of *pracharika* Poonam Gupta, whom she chaperones during her stays at the Delhi head office in Patel Nagar.

when there seemed the possibility that the true citizens of Hindu Rashtra would subscribe to the full range of Sangh values. If now a split develops between a core and fully integrated group and a very broad support group which is nonetheless very thinly integrated with the Sangh, then already this signfies a retreat from its totalitarian hegemonic perspective. This reminds me of some research that some of us did on RSS-run schools in Delhi 1994.[24] The schoolchildren were loyal enough to the school, except when it came to cultural activities. They were unhappy about the ban on Western pop music and sarcastic about the fact that at school picnics they had to sing *bhajan* after *bhajan*. This might sound like the usual conflict between generations, but we need to remind ourselves that the RSS self-definition is that it is a "cultural organisation". It has remained from its inception committed to taking over the entire political and cultural universe of young volunteers. Its central agenda has always been to train future citizens of the Hindu Rashtra: young, upper-caste, affluent, educated men and women.[25] The possible partial failure in this respect is significant.

Now, *Jagriti* has been discontinued, replaced with an annual news-sheet, *Sevika*. The difference in nomenclature is interesting, for *Jagriti* (Awakening) had a dynamic, forceful ring to it that tried to merge into the mainstream women's movement and its language. The cover depicted a young girl resolutely stepping out of darkness into a circle of light.[26] Such a visual self-representation did not jar on the sensibility of the women's

[24] Tapan Basu and I investigated the RSS-run Saraswati Shishu and Bal Mandirs under the Samarth Shiksha Samiti, an affiliate of the all-India Vidya Bharati scheme, in Delhi in 1993–4.

[25] See Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, op. cit.

[26] See the discussion of the magazine in Sarkar, "Woman as Communal Subject", op. cit.

movement. The articles mostly spoke of women's problems in modern cities and offered instructions on how to negotiate them with strength and dignity. They also discussed citizenship rights and how to realise them. There was a strong note of protest against discrimination, an untheorised yet implicit recognition of patriarchal oppression. Even though *shakha*s did their daily brainwashing on the plight of Hindu women at the hands of Muslims, the journal was concerned, by and large, with women's problems – if not so much at home, then certainly in public places.

The new news-sheet firmly puts the Samiti woman in her appointed place – that of service. It is concerned with distinguishing itself from the aspirations of the women's movement, not about appropriating and subverting some of the aspirations. The Samiti calendar for 1999 lists a ritual event for each day of the year, and on most days there are many more than a single event. Many of these require a visit to the local temple, a pilgrimage, and/or the intercession of a priest. There is no political event recognised in the calendar, not even 6 December, though their women remain very proud of it. The point is that the women of the Samiti are now given a purely ritual identity, not an overt or active political one. Here, the larger interests of the Parivar are important. All local temple networks are co-ordinated by the VHP, which also has great influence on the priestly establishment. Women of the Right have to ensure that the entire mechanism of temples, domestic ritual events, pilgrimage sites, and priests is efficiently fuelled through a constant rota of scheduled activities. The VHP published an *Achar Samhita* (Domestic Code) for Hindus in 1987, even before it published its *Rashtra Samhita*. It has identical instructions about temple visits for all householders.[27]

[27] Hellman, *Political Hinduism*, op. cit.

In the early 1990s the Samiti saw itself as performing the same functions *vis-à-vis* the women's fronts of the Sangh which the Sangh performs *vis-à-vis* its own subordinate affiliates. It claimed that these subsidiary women's fronts were trained by them, that their leaders were simultaneously Samiti members. Now they repudiate all ambition of repeating the Sangh's role within the cluster of women's fronts within the Sangh Parivar. They do mention that the BJP MPs Sumitra Mahajan and Vijayraje Scindia, as well as Krishna Sharma from the VHP Mahila Mandal, are Samiti members but they do not claim that this indicates a substantial pedagogical function for the Samiti.[28] If anything, they try to gesture at a growing separation among the various affiliates of the Sangh, though the Sangh does contain, train, and nurture all of them.[29] Especially, there is an attempt to differentiate between the Samiti and the BJP's women politicians.

The transiting to a ritual/domestic from a public/activist role does not bespeak a return to the so-called peaceful maternal bosom of faith from the turbulence of modern politics. The urge for violence, destruction, revenge, for trampling over Muslims and Christians, is, if anything, even more strident today, but the Samiti transmits it in a different way. Both Poonam Gupta and Asha Sharma indignantly refuted my timid suggestions that Rithambhara's audio cassette and her call for a slaughter of Muslims might be a bit problematic. They both said, in identical words, that these things needed to be said, and that Rithambhara "was the only one who could have said them". Poonam Gupta referred to Rithambhara's current work with an orphanage and her low-key existence in the middle-class Agrasen Apartments of

[28] Interview with Asha Sharma, op. cit.

[29] Interview with Poonam Gupta, op. cit.

Patparganj with some regret. At the same time, an equal agency in violent politics does not seem to be on the agenda. The heady hopes of going into war under the banner of the Samiti icon of Ashtabhuja Durga are no longer articulated. The Samiti is content, as we shall see later, to remain a transmission belt for the RSS, conveying stories about Muslim and Christian "atrocities" against Hindus. There is a retreat to older female functions and roles where women gossip about things that they have not seen themselves but have heard from their men.

Retreat from active violence or public politics does not mean an emphasis on women-centred work. Samiti office-bearers often refer to the "social work" that their women do so well from their homes, but, when they are pressed to specify, they fall back on "writing letters to newspapers about oppression of Hindus and about sex and violence in Western movies and TV shows."[30] The Samiti celebrated its sixtieth year in 1996 with a national seminar on this theme. It also conducts workshops on the Vande Mataram hymn of Bankimchandra, which the RSS considers the authentic national anthem of the Hindu nation. These workshops were held in public schools and in Delhi colleges such as Shivaji College, Janaki Devi College, and S.P. Mukherjee College. The seminars and letters to the editors seem to be the only other things that they do, apart from running *shakhas*. Despite five years of support from the Delhi government and access to its funds, they have not set up shelters and counselling or legal help centres for battered women, nor significant schemes for employment generation and slum welfare. Elsewhere, too, a picture of minor sporadic activity emerges. They run a girls' hostel at Nagpur, and a new one has been opened at Jalandhar

[30] Interview with Asha Sharma, op. cit.

in Punjab. Interestingly, perhaps as a rejoinder to the work of the murdered missionary Graham Staines, they proudly referred to a hostel at Bilaspur in Madhya Pradesh where girls from homes afflicted with leprosy are enrolled. However, they hastened to assure me, the girls themselves are "healthy" and remain segregated from their infected surroundings, as do the *sevika*s who cater to them. A more telling contrast to Staines cannot be imagined.[31] They have not begun schemes for training women members of *panchayati* institutions, nor have they any ideas about how women function within them. The contrast with the Left and radical women's organisations comes readily to mind. Despite great opposition and obstructions placed on their functioning by patriarchal and state agencies, Left and radical women's organisations provide precisely these services and empowering resources to women. Shiv Sena women corporators, who represent wards with substantial slums, could say nothing much about alleviation schemes that they had started, although they spend a lot on bus shelters that display Sena posters and portraits of Bal Thackeray. Shraddha Yadav said she has used corporation funds to build a local Sena office. On the other hand, they all expressed great interest in the "beautification and development" of their wards, which normally require much slum "clearance" and displacement and the uprooting of poor people from their homes and places of work. They were all very silent about poverty in the slums.[32] Whereas in the early 1990s women tended to say something on the question of poverty and express confidence that their organisation would develop the nation, there is now a strange and deafening silence on these themes. If you ask them about

[31] Interviews with Asha Sharma and Poonam Gupta.

[32] Interviews with Visakha Raut, Sadhana Mane, Surekha Patil, Umeesha Pawar, and Shraddha Yadav.

the present problems facing the country, none refer to poverty. If you drag it into the conversation and refer to the accumulating, visible, everyday signs of its growth in Delhi that nobody can possibly miss, they say there is no need to degrade the country in public. The idea expressed is that we should speak of our achievements – predictably, the Bomb – not of our problems.[33] They will not make even gestural, token, minimal suggestions for any form of poverty alleviation that their organisation might supposedly be planning. State power seems to have put a closure to an acknowledgement of the phenomenon – this, even after the recent state elections have made it abundantly clear that the failure to speak of poverty cost them dear. When I appealed to their swadeshi instincts, they refused to link globalisation with the problems of withdrawal from the social sector and subsidies, or the effects of structural adjustment on the withdrawal of public sector enterprises. They would discuss only the plight of Indian manufacturers whose products suffer on account of foreign competition. If these were not threatened, they had no objection to foreign products per se.

Social questions are abhorred as divisive of national unity and avoided in the *boudhik* (ideological) sessions of the *shakha*s, which remain central to their enterprise. They see them as mobilising points for entire localities, since it is through intimate relations with women that they gain entry into their homes. Since each *shakha* trains 20–25 women at most, relations are warm and close, spiced with "enjoyable" activities like storytelling and games.[34] Parents who do not subscribe to the Sangh's ideology still like sending their daughters to the *shakha*s since they teach

[33] Interview with Asha Sharma.

[34] Interview with Poonam Gupta, op. cit.

deference and obedience, and inculcate conservative values such as the desirability of an arranged marriage, good home-keeping, modesty in dress and behaviour, and diligent service in favour of men and elders. The girls themselves like going because the physical training programmes are invaluable ways of gaining control over their own bodies when they have control over so little. The sense of physical well-being, strength, and empowerment remain valued resources in a context where no other kinds of empowerment are offered. Also, the ideological instructions about service for a militaristic and aggressive Hindu nation, of fighting for vengeance against its enemies, and about the heroism of legendary men and women who resisted the "enemies of the nation" fulfil aspirations for a life above pure self-interest and release frustrations built up within girls by orthodox families.

There are additional factors: those being instructed are told nothing that offends mainstream patriarchal Hindu nationalist values and myths.[35] On account of the realisation that young girls are not the most enthusiastic of members, they have not prohibited the new consumerist pleasures in the cause of fighting Western culture: they are, for instance, encouraged to look good in the modern way. They can visit beauty parlours and buy beauty products – provided these are as far as possible home-manufactured. Though miniskirts and shorts are out since they expose the body, jeans are all right if they suit their figures. If they do not have the right figure, they must cultivate one.[36] These are important concessions. The new consumerist self-absorption of the middle-class woman – fanned by the advertisement culture and a flood of beauty aids, cosmetics, and household gadgets – is encouraged since such purchases mean economic survival for

[35] Interview with Kanchan Lalporewala, op. cit.

[36] Interview with Asha Sharma, op. cit.

much of the country's manufacturing and trading classes that are the major basis of political support for the Sangh Parivar.

What cannot be tolerated, however, and what is powerfully and continuously denounced as the fruit of the Western poison tree, is the notion of equal gender rights. Poonam Gupta says there has been far too much talk about the rights of Indian women; it has led to domestic competition, unhappiness, broken families, blighted children.[37] Such rights are the poison injected by the colonial state and its educational policies, says Asha Sharma. Colonial foreign education is the biggest single problem in India today, she says, especially because it has taught women all the wrong things. A proper Hindu educational system would restore the ancient wisdom about pure wives and good mothers. When I asked her how as a Samiti activist she would distinguish herself from other women's organisations, she said immediately:

> They teach women about their rights, they tell them to fight their men for these rights. We teach them how to sacrifice themselves to keep the family together. Rights may be fine in theory, but it is wrong to fight for them. Women lose more eventually that way. Don't you remember your mother? Did she need to go to the law court to be happy? My mother was worshipped like a queen in the family. A good, pure Hindu woman can achieve such respect, such happiness by being a mother. Why do they want to throw it away by fighting for rights?

When I asked her how women were expected to cope with dowry demands, domestic violence, desertion, and discrimination, she said:

> We teach them how to do it, how to possess honour, dignity and authority in the family. They do so by being good mothers, nothing can take that away from them. If they suffer in every other way, and

[37] Interview with Poonam Gupta, op. cit.

> they still nurse their children lovingly, then who will not honour them for that? How can they be good wives, good mothers, if they think all the time of how to be the equal of men, of doing better than them, of competing with them and fighting with them over rights?[38]

Poonam Gupta used a colourful analogy to make the same point. "Because seats are reserved for women on buses, they get only the reserved seats, but no more than that. If seats were not reserved for them, all the men on the bus would give up their seats to each woman who did not have one. All talk of laws on equality deprives women in this way."[39]

Their critique of the concept of equal rights and legal guarantees for such rights is based on an absolute silence in relation to gender problems. The old *Jagriti* had been equally silent about problems within the family, but it had had a lot to say about discrimination in public spaces, in state agencies, in workplaces. *Sevika*s now refuse to discuss even those aspects. When I asked Poonam Gupta what she considered the biggest problem for Indian women, she could not for a long time think of a single issue; eventually, she came up with "rape". That, of course, paves the way for the well-worn theme of alleged Muslim lust for the pure Hindu woman. Similarly, when I asked Asha Sharma the same question, she mentioned the British education policy which closed women's eyes to questions of "nationality, patriotism, culture and motherhood" by teaching them about "struggles, law, fighting against men". She impatiently shrugged off my queries about dowry and domestic violence as things that do not merit discussion. At length, she said rape was a massive problem.

[38] Interview with Asha Sharma, op. cit.

[39] Interview with Poonam Gupta.

The new phase of the Left-secular-feminist women's movement consolidated itself around rape as a symbol of the most violent expression of patriarchal values, of the complicity between the state and violent men.[40] The founder of the Samiti, Lakshmibai Kelkar, as we have seen, had also urged *shakha*s for women when she saw a wife being assaulted in the presence of her husband – her conclusion being that since Hindu men cannot defend their wives, the wives must learn to protect themselves. The present reasoning of the Samiti is different from both understandings. Rapes occur, they say, because women have forfeited their older modes of honour and motherhood status on account of struggles and enmity against men. Moreover, Western films and cable-TV programmes have created a vulgar preoccupation with sex and desire unknown to past Hindu society. The solution of women who articulate this now, unlike that of their founder, does not lie in the physical empowerment of threatened women but in the retrieval of past honour. They believe this can be achieved by recuperating the traditional motherhood ideal and selectively banning the media's deleterious programmes.[41]

Banning, prohibition – these become very important words at a significant point in their discourse. When I asked her about the *Fire* controversy, Asha Sharma expressed revulsion against what she termed "inter-relationships among women" – the word "lesbian" she found too foul to utter. She was emphatic that such *vikriti* – the product of Western culture – should be banned, as should its sympathetic portrayal. When I asked if other categories of women should also lose their rights, she was perfectly willing

[40] See Nandita Shah and Nandita Gandhi, *Issues of State: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women Movement in India*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992.

[41] Asha Sharma, interview, op. cit.

to extend the boundaries: Hindu women do not know how to be unfaithful, but if some degenerate elements within them are impure in their behaviour, they must have no rights at all.[42] So, rights are to be whittled away at both ends. Certain kinds of rights, the right to "perversion", should not exist at all. Certain kinds of people, those who do not conform to Hindu standards, should possess no rights either. Above all, the argument is that the very notion of rights is an inducement to rape and domestic unhappiness, the sole cause of men oppressing women – happiness and safety versus rights and equality. Moreover, women have a duty to forgo such dangerous ideas, given that these are Western, alien, colonial. If they succumb to the seduction of the West, they ruin their faith, their culture. To be so seduced is to embrace a form of unchastity, a kind of adultery in itself, an unfaithfulness to their rightful lords and masters.

Asha Sharma's critique of the theory of equal rights began with *Fire*. Once the word "ban" had been uttered in connection with that film, it acted like a drop of quicksilver, stretching out and crawling rapidly in all directions. Almost immediately, her interdictions began to spread over an immense variety of activities and people. The floodgates opened and one could see that the words "our culture and its *vikriti*" were free-floating signifiers that could encompass anything from Muslims to the Left – anything at all demanding equal rights for elements that could be branded as not a part of "our culture".

The immediate subtext – this was after the BJP had lost the no-confidence motion – was Sonia Gandhi. At the same time, the point of entry is noticeable, for *Fire* enabled uttering the word "ban", which immediately incorporated the practice of

[42] Ibid.

lesbianism, its representation in the media, and the women and lesbian groups that defended screening the film. It is a sideways attack that begins at the margins, from the corners, from the least-known and least-theorised of issues in our context, unlike other gender issues or themes of class and caste. Asha Sharma presumed that I would share her point of view. Beginning with such obscure, unnoticed beginnings, the notion of interdictions could swell and flow like an oncoming tide, till the notion of fixed rights became tattered and meaningless.

Rights are pitted against "our modes of being" which, in their turn, are guarantors of happiness and harmony – the pure wife, the good mother, the Hindu woman. They militate against both culture and virtue – a very big burden of sins! Let me cite a few instances of opposition and denunciation. Ashok Singhal, quoted reverently in the Samiti's commemorative number of 1996, *Vishwambhara*:

> Vedic sages gave all responsibility to Brahmin women for the welfare of the family . . . Today our women are competing with men about same rights. This shows the downfall of women . . . Nudity is more valued than purity . . . under Western influence, they feed their own babies from bottles, not from their breasts . . . they value their youth more than they value their wombs, they will kill their own foetus to protect their looks . . . It is vital that they return to their Hindu roots . . .[43]

If this seems like the lunatic fringe, let us turn to an article by the BJP MP Sumitra Mahajan. At the Beijing conference of women in 1995 she found to her horror and grief that the Indian delegates no longer recognised the Hindu woman's need to be different from her Western counterpart. Such women had even

[43] Ashoke Singhal in *Vishwambhara*, Delhi, 1996.

organised demonstrations "without shame or grace", to protest against the behaviour of their own men. "*Saman adhikar ke liye mahilayen lalayit hai*" (women are lusting after equal rights); they are greedy for "*adhikar aur upabhog*" (rights and pleasure); " they were content with two small meals a day, but now they are so greedy that they will serve beer to men at beer bars in Mumbai late at night so that they can make more and more money."[44] The leader of the Sangh's trade union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, Dattopant Thengde, asserts: "*Nari vikas ka adhar adhikar aur andolan nahi*" (the basis for the upliftment of women is not rights or movements). Predictably, he counterposes the wife and the mother, thus making the woman in movements for rights necessarily a non-wife and non-mother.[45] In fact, motherhood and wifehood are made incompatible with employment and public identities. It is assumed that women seek jobs to satisfy consumerist desires. Asha Sharma forbids jobs except in cases of dire economic compulsion.[46]

Let me cite the Samiti prayer at some length on this:

> Benevolent, auspicious Hindu Land
> I dedicate my life to you . . .
> Your ideas about holy chastity
> Embrace your beloved daughters . . .
> Bless our meek, pious, devout women
> Dedicated to their religion and tradition
> We are the blessed mothers
> Of this powerful nation . . .

Hindu women are made in the image of the Motherland herself. An unfaithful surrender to alien values like equality and

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Interview, op. cit.

rights will therefore ruin not only themselves but the Hindu Rashtra too.[47]

To counter dangerous ideas, Asha Sharma explains that she teaches the ideal of obedience. Girls must submit to parents, wives to husbands, or else homes will break up and children rendered bereft of solace and shelter. The motif of the suffering child is used as the most powerful anodyne. Western ideas like widow remarriage are sought to be brought under control. Widows with children must not remarry, for the children will then lose both parents. Mothers may work only in circumstances of dire economic necessity. Broken homes are caused by self-indulgent women wanting to satisfy desires and seek pleasure. Pleasure, desire, and rights are aligned as the "other" of motherhood and tradition. To teach them young, a detailed code of "decent" behaviour and dress is elaborated to *shakha* members. If they conform, they will be protected from rape and gain happy homes.[48]

The major political function of the Samiti remains the dissemination of communalism. Women are taught to "analyse" current affairs and newspapers at *shakhas*. They are told about the Hindu Rashtra, about Christian colonial and Muslim misdeeds of the past, and about "Christian aggression and violent attacks on Hindu women, men and temples in all parts of the country in the past year." They are fed horror stories about attacks on Hindu women in communal riots. They are told that no Hindu has ever attacked a Muslim or a Christian and that not a single Muslim or Christian has been killed by a Hindu; and that Christians habitually annoy Hindus by inciting Dalits.[49] Dalits are like ignorant children, says Poonam Gupta with a contemptuous laugh. "You just smile at them, say a few sweet things, and

[47] See *Vishwambhara*, op. cit.

[48] Interview with Asha Sharma, op. cit.

[49] Asha Sharma, interview, op. cit.

they have lost their hearts to you." The tone suggests a mongrel wagging his tail at a morsel thrown to him.[50] The communal perspective slides smoothly into social hierarchy. They reiterate this idea frequently: "We do not approve of reservations, whether for women or for some castes. It does not help anyone, merit must be observed."[51]

V

*Sevika*s are home- and neighbourhood-based, insulated from contamination by lesser social circles. There is only one major exception to this. Some of them, mostly the unmarried *pracharika*s, work in the Sangh's slum rehabilitation programmes under the Seva Bharati scheme. Some others train teachers who work in RSS schools under the banner of Vidya Bharati. Both are huge growth areas for the Sangh, with the Vidya Bharati schools competing with the government chain of Model schools, and the Seva Bharati running 1700 centres in Delhi alone. Most teachers in the Vidya Bharati scheme are women, and the Seva Bharati work of rehabilitation would seem to require "womanly" nurturing services. Yet Samiti participation even here is highly restricted. The Samiti is at best an auxiliary of certain fronts under the Sangh.

The Sangh Parivar appears to have launched on a curious course of action. It proudly forefronts elected women members in the higher legislative and executive bodies. In this respect, its record is far better than that of the Left. On the other hand, women who are thus exalted do not come from women's organisations, nor do they have prominent bases among women of their own

[50] Interview with Poonam Gupta, op. cit.

[51] Interviews with Asha Sharma and Poonam Gupta, op. cit.

political clusters. They are quite indifferent to women's issues, problems, and demands. What is the implication of this split between the women's organisations and women in electoral politics? Incidentally, the same pattern is repeated among the women of the Shiv Sena in Mumbai. Prominent, long-standing women corporators and MLAs have no contact with or knowledge of the Mahila Aghadi. Sudha Chari, founder of the Aghadi and a very senior Shiv Sena member, has no power or visibility within the party, nor was she ever allowed to be a candidate for any kind of electoral seat.[52]

The need to field women candidates is obvious, given a steadily growing women's constituency, reinforced by extremely vocal and active women's movements. Also, the reservation of seats for women in local and state-level elected bodies makes it indispensable. The interesting thing is the careful insulation of such candidates from women's issues and organisations even within the Sangh Parivar.

I would argue that the need to push women into electoral politics is counterpointed deliberately by efforts to ensure that this does not add an edge to gender concerns or to the empowerment of women within the Sangh Parivar. Women enter electoral politics and earn the party some kudos for progressive attitudes, without a concomitant compulsion for the Sangh Parivar as a whole to sensitise itself to women's needs. Moreover, women MPs or MLAs of the BJP cannot enter the sanctum sanctorum of decision-making – the Sangh itself – which remains exclusively male. Nor are there women members in the central organising committee of the Shiv Sena. The implications of their prominence in public politics are thus clipped at both ends. Women's

[52] Interviews with six Shiv Sena corporators and with Sudha Chari in Mumbai, March 1999.

organisations, on the one hand, cannot borrow the lustre of their elected sisters who, on the other hand, are individuals unconnected with organised women as a front within the Parivar. I found it interesting that Samiti office-bearers and *pracharika*s were quite contemptuous about the issue of women's reservation in parliament, arguing that it denoted a tragic dilution of the principle of merit. One can perhaps make the same point about the Left parties, which have a remarkable absence of women in their central decision-making bodies. At the same time, their women's organisations are vibrant, dynamic, burgeoning, innovative, and creative fronts, in sharp contrast to the rather moth-eaten Samiti of the Sangh Parivar and the Mahila Aghadi of the Shiv Sena.

## VI

If the Samiti is now a small, bounded, non-expansive affair – like the good, modest, non-competitive Hindu woman – then what is the significance of the new accents and stresses within it? I believe that the pattern has great relevance. The women are the custodians of essential Sangh values, of its authentic ideology, which the other fronts have somewhat diluted and imperilled in the current war games over electoral power. Since electoral preoccupations will continue to grow, the conservation of older values becomes all the more crucial. Hence the Samiti is important as both guarantee as well as mirror.

Secondly, if the battle over electoral power is ever decisively won, the Samiti will be the nucleus of the new Hindu domesticity. Its women will be the exemplars, living models for the pattern to be realised in the Hindu Rashtra of the future. Therefore, precisely at the moment of expected triumph, the Parivar needs

to contract its activities and affirm its purity, domesticity, and conservatism at the cost of its public activism. It would be quite misleading to believe that this is an entirely imposed change enforced by the male Sangh. Women have genuinely invested in this commitment. They see a bright future for themselves as the soul of the Hindu Rashtra, as the defenders of tradition against the West, as partners in an internal colonisation over the Muslim and the Christian.

Finally, the convictions that the Samiti expresses go beyond gender; or, rather, gender is the pattern, the inspiration for relations between castes and classes. Since it can mystify its operations of power with intimacy, it is the most effective argument for all hierarchies. The battle against equality and rights that the Samiti has undertaken in the name of Hindu traditions is also a larger unnamed struggle that the Sangh is engaged in to reorient the discursive order of power relations in the Hindu Rashtra of its dreams.

# 4

# Love in the Time of Hindutva

THE RSS BUILDS on a strong foundation of an already existing Hindu social common sense that pre-dates it. It brings to this inchoate mass of beliefs and prejudices a precise and purposeful direction. It selects various ingredients from the floating *bricolage* of sentiments and notions and manipulates them into a firm ideological agenda and commitment. Its real power derives from the fact that it works along the grain of, rather than against, long held and much cherished social and moral norms and beliefs.

There are, of course, alternative resources within Hindu religious understandings. But these lack the cohesion and leadership required to make them operationally effective against Hindutva hate campaigns. Hindutva, in contrast, controls a vast range of important Hindu religious authorities and establishments. The VHP trains temple and domestic priests and organises associations of *sadhus* and *mohunts*: sectarian and monastic establishments and ascetics.[1] "Love" has a central location and critical function in the politics and ideology of Hindutva. A fundamental

[1] Manjari Katju, *Vishva Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003.

tenet of theirs is that Hindus and Muslims are not the same species, that they do not share a common humanity. Love or friendship between them is therefore unnatural.

"Love jihad" refers to love between a Hindu woman and a Muslim man. Much violence against Muslim youths and their families has for long been organised under this banner, especially in Kerala and Mangalore from the 1970s.[2] But let me cite an early instance from Delhi. In 1970 Javeed Alam, a Muslim college teacher, and Jayanti Guha, a Hindu research scholar, married under the Civil Marriage Act. Both their families were happy about the marriage. But the principal of the Delhi college where Alam taught sacked him on the grounds of abducting a Hindu woman. Hindutva posters soon covered Delhi asking "Where is Jayanti?", alleging her abduction and forced conversion to Islam. Even after her father wrote to the entire national media to deny the charges, the rumours continued. A supportive vice chancellor at Delhi University, with a like-minded teachers' union, protested against the principal's conduct to finally help countermand the dismissal.[3]

A Delhi VHP leader told us in 1990 that their men scour registry offices to scan marriage notices – these have to be put up in advance. If they discover the announcement of an intercommunity marriage, they ask the parents of the two who intend to marry whether they know of the impending nuptials. If the parents do not approve of the marriage, the VHP tries to block it with their help; if they do approve of the marriage, the organisation's effort is to try to dissuade the parents from giving their consent.

[2] P.K.Y. Arafat, "Should Muslims Fear the Kiss of Love?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 December 2014.

[3] J. Alam, "Love Story of Javeed-Jayanti", *Women's Watch* (Delhi), October–December 2014.

The VHP leader we spoke to went into a repulsively graphic account of Muslim lust in a speech that lasted over two hours.[4] A Rashtrasevika Samiti leader said to me in 1999: "They have always raped us, now we must rape them."[5] Within the same sentence she doubled her gender, becoming both raped and rapist. The basic point she was making is widely believed and circulated: all Muslim men are in this view to be coded as genetically rapists, so that then their love for a Hindu women must of necessity be the prelude to force – a war by other means.

Love-jihad campaigns later shifted to North India, especially to Uttar Pradesh, which, currently run by the BJP, was till recently ruled by a non-BJP regional party.[6] The grounds for a shift in favour of the BJP had been prepared by a savage anti-Muslim pogrom at Muzaffarnagar in 2013. Love-jihad episodes there overlapped with the mob-lynching of "untouchable" Dalit castes, and of Muslims who had allegedly slaughtered cows sacred to caste Hindus. Rumours about both then expanded into allegations of forced conversion to Islam and Christianity (for reasons I discuss later). The BJP eventually collected a spectacular electoral harvest from this package of rumours. Hate campaigns resemble a pack of cards that can be continually shuffled and reshuffled: all alleged provocations are interdependent, each energises the other.

[4] See interview with B.L. Sharma "Prem", in Delhi, March 1990, in T. Basu, *et al.*, eds, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993, chapter 3.

[5] Tanika Sarkar, "The Gender Predicament of the Hindu Right", in K.N. Panikkar, ed., *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1999.

[6] G.V. Bhatnagar, "BJP, RSS Caught Using 'Love Jihad' Bogey to Fuel Communal Polarization", *The Wire*, 5 October 2015.

Love-jihad incidents flourished between 2012 and 2015.[7] Hindutva women formed a "Women from India Against Love Jihad" and every case of intercommunity romance and marriage was reported as an episode of rape by English and Hindi newspapers, as well as by the electronic and social media.[8] The reports were embellished with garish visual illustrations of Hindu female vulnerability and Muslim male lust and ferocity. A Hindu temple priest at Gorakhpur, Adityanath, anointed by the Indian prime minister as the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, said these signified more than individual grossness among Muslims: they were nothing less than an "international conspiracy".[9] A VHP woman activist from Bhopal elaborated the notion to a research scholar who interviewed her in 2016.[10] The conspiracy, she said, originates in Pakistan, which sends terrorist emissaries to India to train Muslim youths in the art of seduction. They pretend to love innocent Hindu girls, elope with them, and then marry them so that they can be converted to Islam. To this there is also a parallel narrative wherein the girl is abducted, forced to marry, and convert. Either way, after her marriage she is made to bear Muslim children in order to provide slave labour to the entire family as well as sexual services to male relatives of her husband. She is then supposedly trafficked to Muslim countries and in this way her fate is sealed.[11]

[7] Ibid.

[8] See for example the Meerut case reported in J. Koshy, "'Love Jihad': Accused Muslim Reunited with Lover by Allahabad High Court", *The Huffington Post,* 16 November 2015.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Anshu Saluja's interview, December 2015, Bhopal. She conducted two rounds of interviews, the second one a year later in December 2016. I am very grateful to her for allowing me access to her material.

[11] Ibid.

So the narrative has a dual beginning and we can choose the one we prefer: all male Muslim love is either fake or disguised coercion. Both are projected as the only possibilities that exist and in either case typical elements of the Muslim male personality are made evident – sly manipulation of trusting Hindu sentiments on the one hand, and ruthlessness and cruelty on the other. Lust for the Hindu woman and ingrained terroristic traits are blended, both being traced back to medieval histories of Muslim conquests of Hindu dynasties.

The VHP activist interviewed in Bhopal also said they have narrated these accounts at great length at various schools in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, currently ruled by the BJP.[12] When the principal of a Christian convent school objected, the VHP blockaded the school and forced her to allow them in to address her students. Hindu girls were warned against even friendship with Muslim girls lest they be lured into a Muslim family.

Let me briefly dwell on a couple of typical love-jihad cases to underline certain generic features. In a highly publicised and sensationalised incident of 12 September 2014, a Hindu girl eloped with a Muslim man from a UP village, and the father alleged abduction. The Allahabad High Court, however, endorsed the couple's decision as consensual. But after they returned, her father threatened to kill her and forced her to file a First Information Report at a police station, alleging rape, abduction, and forced conversion. The case dragged on while the media was flooded with grisly horror stories of her fate in the Muslim household. The man was arrested and his family harassed. But that October she appeared in court, retracted her allegations, and said they were made under parental duress.[13]

[12] Ibid.

[13] N. Dixit, "'Love Jihad': War on Romance in India", *Al-Jazeera,* 14 October 2014.

A similar case was reported from Mainpuri district, UP. Muhammad Reyaz and Priya Gupta eloped, the village council met and decided to call it abduction, a police case was filed, and tensions ran high. Again, the girl deposed in court that the allegations were false. By then, however, Muslims had been attacked and their houses burnt.[14]

I personally knew of a sixteen-year-old Hindu girl who had been in a relationship with a local Muslim man.[15] After a while the man wanted to break off the relationship. Outraged, she went to the local VHP don and complained of betrayal. She was immediately taken to the police station, where her hand was held to force her to sign a complaint of rape, even though she tried to pull back. Since she was below eighteen, the statutory age of consent, and since the police found evidence of sexual cohabitation, her later anguished pleas that sex had been consensual were futile: the man was arrested for rape and beaten up. With extraordinary strength of mind, she managed to withstand VHP and police pressure, claiming that her sexual connections had not happened with the Muslim man but with a Hindu one – who had since disappeared. This complicated legal fiction led to the release of the Muslim man, but he faced considerable social ostracism: his family was under tremendous pressure and he was forced to leave his job and the neighbourhood.

Several threads unify the plots of these stories despite the significant variations. It seems very frequently the case that the families of the woman and the police join hands with VHP activists to fabricate a case of abduction and rape. The woman comes under tremendous pressure to formally file a rape and abduction

[14] A.E. Suresh, "Love Jihad : UP's Forbidden Couples", *Hindustan Times*, 19 October 2016.

[15] This happened in a South Delhi slum in 2014. I will not disclose the girl's identity for reasons to do with her personal security.

charge. If the couple elopes, she is forced to return to her parents by the police while the case drags on. Parents use intimidation and violence to force her to repeat the story of rape in court. However, very often, love wins and she retracts her complaint.

But even when both families approve of the romance, there is already an overarching plot structure – a conspiracy theory – in place to overwrite the dissonant element and force the narrative back to its predestined route. For within this lies a hidden but interesting subtext: the anxiety over an imagined surplus of charm and attractiveness in Muslim men indicating a parallel worry about a deficit of these virtues among Hindus. The real purpose of Muslim love is thus always and in any case to turn Hindus into Muslims, first by converting the woman – by force or by superbly faked sexual charm – and second by filling her womb with Muslim children to undermine the Hindu numerical majority of India. From this it follows that, gradually, an Islamicised India will fall into the hands of Pakistan and terrorists. The VHP activist from Bhopal complained that Hindu men cannot pay back Muslims in their own coin since they find Muslim women unclean.[16]

Such an explanation of intercommunity love does not apply when a Muslim girl marries a Hindu man. Demographic calculations are reversed in such cases, and the trope of the Muslim male's voracious sexual appetite or hidden terrorist plot finds no purchase in the image of the Hindu man who has won over a Muslim girl. Demographic anxieties are, moreover, constantly stoked by a bizarre arithmetic which has become extremely popular. Each Muslim man apparently marries four wives because

[16] Anshu Saluja's interview with a VHP activist in December 2016 in Bhopal.

polygamy is allowed under Muslim personal law – even though censuses show that Hindus, too practise polygamy. Each Muslim man then breeds prodigiously, whereas Hindus, condemned to monogamy by their personal law reforms after Independence, reproduce far less immoderately. The arithmetic seems calculated to make predisposed believers overlook the fact that it makes no difference whether four women are impregnated by four different men or by one man: in either case, each woman can only bear one child at a time. The fact elided is that neither monogamy nor polygamy makes the least bit of difference to the number of children that a woman can have. The other obvious arithmetical elision is that, given the relative percentages of the Muslim and Hindu population in India (less than 15 per cent Muslim, more than 80 per cent Hindu), population growth in the country has been historically fuelled by the Hindu rate of reproduction.

Abduction tales, patterned on identical lines, have reigned in UP since the 1920s.[17] These have stoked campaigns for "reconversion" as conversions away from Hinduism also diminish Hindu numbers.[18] Conversions – whether to Islam or Christianity – are alike, both represented as products of force or fraud. This justifies the Hindutva campaigns to "reconvert".

[17] Charu Gupta, "Myths of Love Jihad: Moral Panic, Past and Present", *Women's Watch*, July–September 2014; see also idem, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002.

[18] *Indian Express*, 29 and 30 July 2015. VHP Chief Pravin Togadia ordered the "immediate conversion" of 50 lakh non-Hindus to ensure that not a single non-Hindu was eventually left in India. Reconversion drives target Christian tribals especially and have led to brutal massacres and displacements. On the Orissa cases, see Angana P. Chatterjee, *Violent Gods: Hindu Nationalism In India's Present – Narratives From Orissa*, Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2009.

Hindu demographic anxieties originated in pre-Partition India, from *c.* 1919, when colonial constitutional reforms opened up some space for the elective principle in legislative bodies. Muslims were then a very much larger minority population and they had been given separate electorates even earlier. In the early 1930s B.R. Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for "untouchable" Dalit castes, which threatened to further impoverish Hindu numbers. In post-Partition India, those old fears are continuously replayed and strengthened in a fundamentally changed situation within which Indian Muslims have been reduced to much smaller numbers *vis-à-vis* Hindus, and to a state of enormous political, social, and economic vulnerability and insecurity. The intent now is internal colonisation.

Renaming love as jihad repurposes the meanings of desire. If the words are new, the idea has old and tenacious roots in sacred texts as well as in political history. Brahmanical scripture prescribes non-dissoluble, endogamous, non-consensual infant marriages for women that remain immutable even beyond the death of her husband: hence, widows should not remarry. From the early twentieth century, Hindu anxieties about the unproductive wombs of Hindu widows and the fertility of remarried Muslim wombs thus became acute. These were transformed into the myth of the planned abduction of Hindu girls. From the 1920s, such rumours often led to violence.[19]

At the time of the Hindu–Muslim civil war just before Partition, rapes and abductions happened in precisely equal numbers among Hindus and Muslims. Hindutva narrratives carefully excise episodes of rapes by Hindus and magnify memories of rapes

[19] P.K. Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

by Muslims. There are, therefore, three temporal moments in the Hindutva reconstruction of public history: the time of Muslim dynasties in medieval India, the time of the 1920s when communal violence became subcontinental in scale, and Partition. The discourse is formed like a palimpsest with several distinct layers. When love-jihad stories are inserted into this larger history, all these separate "memories" are reactivated, adding to the impact of the new stories.

Hindu marriage, moreover, is traditionally endogamous and inter-caste marriages are as much an affront to social morality as intercommunity marriages. In practice, marriages between Dalit and non-Dalit castes fetch penalties as harsh as do Hindu–Muslim marriages, and Dalit families, too, may punish love for non-Dalits.[20] But a curious discursive difference separates inter-caste marriages from intercommunity ones. In Hindutva rhetoric, Hindus constitute an organic and indivisible unity. So, despite the actual rule of endogamy, inter-caste marriages cannot be publicly stigmatised by a negative naming. They can be, and are, punished within the community and the family in the most horrible manner, especially if a girl from a higher caste has a relationship with a Dalit man, or if even a friendship is suspected. But they do not generate political campaigns, as intercommunity marriages do.

The proscription of love beyond boundaries is not unique to Hindutva or to endogamous Hindus. When a Kochi cafe, suspected as a site for intercommunity romances, was attacked

[20] A nineteen-year-old Dalit girl was stoned to death by her father and brother for going out with a man from another village in UP. Endogamy, therefore, may indicate narrower boundaries than caste. *Indian Express*, 10 January 2015.

in Kerala in October 2014 by Hindutva mobs,[21] several Muslim organisations also criticised relationships beyond the community borders. They ostracised public kissing inspired by nationwide "Kiss of Love" campaigns as anti-Islam. But the orthodoxy of a political and numerical majority carries far greater weight and power than that of a besieged minority.

There are, then, three kinds of constraints on love that are already in place: against pre-marital love, against love marriages, and against intercommunity love. The last is a part of the general structure of prohibitory norms as well as its worst-case scenario.

But why is love seen as a potent political danger as well as a social one? There are several reasons. Non-normative unsanctioned mutual desire challenges the logic of rigorously policed borders between caste and caste, community and community. It beckons individuals to act on their personal decisions, to disobey sacred prescriptions. The price of disobedience must be pitched at prohibitively high levels.

The discourse on love jihad represents the Hindu woman as innocent and helpless, without a mind of her own, not able to differentiate between genuine and fraudulent or malevolent love: in other words, she is not capable of making her own choices. A perpetual child, she needs perpetual surveillance by family and by community.

But women alone are not the subjects of totalitarian discipline. Forbidding intercommunity love is a very important first step, indeed, in preserving family control over marriages and over the autonomy of young people, for men as well as women. But that forms part of a larger package of prohibitions against all

[21] G.G. Giril, "Live and Let Kiss, say Kochi Crusaders", *Times of India*, 2 November 2014.

expressions of love that are not socially and parentally approved. The BJP held out longest against the legalisation of gay-lesbian relationships.

In their broadest implications, therefore, love-jihad campaigns derive their energy and legitimacy from a large structure of sensibilities. They become a mode of making ideal citizens – both men and women – for the Hindu Rashtra, of producing docile, submissive subjects who will not question regimes of power – be they neo-liberal or religious majoritarian – or social hierarchies and injustice. Inequality, like charity, begins at home, among different generations and between genders, and hegemonic social injunctions are taught at first in the intimate sphere, from which it is carried into a person's relationship with broader social and state injunctions. The family is also the primary unit from which imagined nations are conjugated – as communities of affect but also as communities that are forever endangered by others. Nations are primarily structured by a sense of ineffable hostilities emanating from Others. As Savarkar had pointed out, nothing unifies a nation more than enmity with another nation.[22]

Inter-caste and intercommunity civil marriages were legalised in India after a long and protracted struggle. Public opinion was so vehemently opposed to the concept that the law eventually restricted them to partners who would proclaim that they were not Hindus, Muslims, Christians: that is, love had to be traded off against religious identity in an implicit recognition that faith does not permit love across borders. In actual practice it was, more or less, reserved to a small reformist sect of Brahmos.[23] It was only

[22] V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* 1923; Delhi: Bharatiya Sahitya Sadan reprint, 1989.

[23] P. Mody, "Love and the Law: Love Marriages in Delhi", *Modern Asian Studies* 36, February 2002.

after Independence that B.R. Ambedkar, the first law minister of India, eradicated all restrictions within civil marriage, producing a most intense backlash from the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS, and even from some Congress politicians. Love jihad has the advantage that it can build on a tenacious historical tradition and entrenched social values.

When social power meets and merges into state power, when the authority of family, community, and faith is conjoined with the state apparatus, the conjoint absolutism knows no bounds. Power becomes seamless. The function of love as a solvent of disciplinary structures therefore exceeds the persons in love, and love is always something more than itself.[24]

[24] Other useful sources in the writing of this essay were: P. Agarwal, "Surat, Savarkar and Draupadi: Legitimizing Rape as a Political Weapon", in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, eds, *Women and the Hindu Right*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995, pp. 29–57; W. Anderson and S.D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1987; P. Bacchetta, "Hindu Women as Ideologues: The Sangh, the Samiti, and their Differential Concepts of the Hindu Nation", in K. Jayawardena and M. de Alvis, eds, *Embodied Violence: Communalizing Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, London: Zed Books, 1996; idem, *Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS Women as Ideologues*, Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004; K.M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991; M.S. Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur, 1938; T.B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999; T.B. Hansen and C. Jaffrelot, eds, *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998; C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*, Delhi: Penguin, 1999; D. Jha, *Shadow Armies: Fringe Organisations and Foot Soldiers of Hindutva*, Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017.

# 5

## Educating the Children of the Hindu Rashtra

### Notes on RSS Schools

THE FIRST NEW VENTURE that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) took forward after Independence was the founding of primary school at Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh in 1952.[1] Designated Saraswati Shishu Mandir, it was inaugurated by the RSS supremo Guruji Golwalkar and blessed by the Congress leader Purushottamdas Tandon, who was also present on the foundation day.[2] As noted earlier in this book, the RSS had already set up its women's wing in the 1930s, and advanced centres of education for older students had been organised in the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad in 1948. Its electoral and labour fronts would be set up somewhat later, in the 1950s, and the religious front, the well-known Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), in 1964.[3] Starting a school was therefore an

[1] The research for this essay was done jointly by Tanika Sarkar and Tapan Basu; the material has been analysed and written up by Tanika Sarkar. This is part of a larger ongoing work on RSS schools in Delhi.

[2] *Organiser*, 11 November 1978.

[3] Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, and Sambudha Sen, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, Delhi, 1983.

important new extension for its strategy, which demanded significant modifications and reorientations in the new context. In this essay, we tentatively explore the location of children's education within the broader structures of RSS activities in the hope that the addition of this significant but virtually unexplored dimension will help illuminate the wider agenda of the Hindu Right.

The decision to set up a school came at a moment of dejection, virtual non-activity – what the BJP leader Sudarshan called "an ideological vacuum".[4] Although the ban on the organisation imposed after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi was removed in 1949, the daily training centres, the *shakha*s, still functioned under a cloud, and the period of rapid expansion during the post-Partition relief and propaganda work among Hindu refugees in the North had come to a standstill. Alternative and contestatory forms of politics that refused to build and feed on the bitter memories of the holocaust were striding ahead. This was the hopeful phase, almost the golden decade of "Nehruvian socialism", of a centrist consensus before it met with major debacles in the 1960s. It was the Left and not the Right that was emerging as the major challenge to centrist politics, and in the 1952 elections the Communist Party of India had established itself as the largest opposition party. It was growing still, and in the next elections of 1956 would form the first non-Congress state government – in Kerala.

The new context shaped by universal franchise and parliamentary democracy posed problems for the comfortable upper-caste composition and base of the Right, which was committed to training the established class and caste leaders of Hindu society in leadership qualities. It was also strongly marked by the recent

[4] Ibid., p. 32.

formulation of a secular constitution framed by an "untouchable" who had rejected Hinduism. The thrust of the Nehruvian foreign policy was increasingly pro-Soviet and, internally, radical social legislation – like the abolition of the zamindari system and Hindu polygamy, and the introduction of divorce – was being proposed and debated hotly. The RSS had neither raised nor approved any of these issues and, unlike the Left, would not challenge the government for a sharpening and honest realisation of radical programmes. It seemed doomed to a position of anachronistic orthodoxy, discredited by its association with Gandhi's assassin, unable to seize an initiative or give a new turn to politics where it could aspire to leadership. Internal dissension was rife within the organisation as never before. Founding a school was one of the ways it used to overcome the impasse and stretch out in untried directions. Shortly afterwards, in 1954, the RSS supremo Golwalkar pronounced a revised and refined ideological package, on the basis of which the Right would venture into hegemony formation in the era of democratic politics.[5]

Uttar Pradesh was, for quite some time in the initial stages, the seedbed for the educational experiment. A Shishushiksha Prabandh Samiti was set up here to co-ordinate Saraswati Shishu Mandirs at the primary school level and Bal Mandirs at the high school level. Delhi, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh picked up the enterprise, each with its state-wide committee. Andhra Pradesh was the first place in the South to develop its Saraswati Vidyapith.[6]

A significant expansion occurred in the 1970s, especially during the Emergency, when a ban brought about an enforced lull in the RSS's usual activities. In 1977, Vidya Bharati was set up

[5] Ibid.

[6] *Organiser*, op. cit.

to co-ordinate efforts at the all-India level and devise curricula for the additional courses that provide the main content of RSS pedagogy. In 1978, after the fall of the Indira Gandhi government, an all-India children's camp was organised in Delhi for three days in November, and the president inaugurated it. Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, and Andhra Pradesh started regular five-yearly state-wide camps. By the end of 1991 Vidya Bharati claimed it was running the second-largest chain of schools in the country, next only to the government schools. About 4000 schools were either directly run by or affiliated to it and over a million children were being taught. It also ran forty colleges and the teaching at various levels was done by 36,000 teachers. It was said that the schools existed everywhere in India, except in Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, where the Christian affiliations of the people and missionary success in the educational field were holding up RSS entry. To force its way in this region, and especially to undercut Christian educational influence, Vidya Bharati developed the Haflong Project. Now, Vidya Bharati's plans call for an increase in the total number of its schools to 10,000 in the next five years, and a school for every block in the country. Uttar Pradesh retains the highest concentration of schools, with 1325 schools and three lakh students under the Vidya Bharati system at the end of 1991. In Delhi, at present, the Samarth Shiksha Samiti (the Delhi wing of the Vidya Bharati) runs forty-four schools: there is one senior secondary-level school at Hari Nagar, six at the secondary level, five at the middle school level and thirty-two at the primary level.[7]

Apart from regular schools, Vidya Bharati has two other kinds of semi-formal programmes. There are Shishu Vatikas

[7] Vidya Bharati, Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sammelan, *Alternative Model of National Education*, December 1990–March 1991.

for pre-school infants, developed in reaction to the success of "westernised" Montessori schools which eliminate the mother as the primary pedagogue at a very early stage. Having criticised them for doing so, Vidya Bharati then proceeds to displace the mother far more completely, with wide-ranging plans for cultivating the "physical, mental, social, and spiritual" qualities of pre-school infants.

In backward areas of the country, where few schools exist and where most children do not attend them, Vidya Bharati sets up Samskar Kendras to implant the right qualities and "noble virtues" in children who are taught for a few hours a week by a single teacher who looks after a locality. Incidentally, the constituency of this project is not described in terms of the economic deprivation or caste-based disadvantages which make children stay away from school. They are politely described as remote areas without any nearby schools – i.e. geographically inaccessible places rather than socially deprived ones. This coyness about mentioning social contradictions and problems is, as we shall see, a marked characteristic of RSS discourses, and the pedagogic designs have developed interesting ways of handling it.

The syllabus of these part-time schools consists of elementary literacy and lessons in religion, "patriotism", and "Indian culture". They exist in four kinds of locales, carefully selected by Vidya Bharati. There are some rural ones, though the Vidya Bharati manuals say very little about their exact locations, their social base, or their spread in recent years. They mention only projects and plans in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. There are, however, 500 such *kendras* in urban slums. They also exist in urban localities which are centres of convent and missionary schools. About a thousand have been set up in tribal areas, especially in the Chhotanagpur region in Bihar, explicitly to counteract missionary educational influence, and to teach Hinduism and

"nationalism" to "misguided" tribals. Clearly, this is the heart of the struggle.[8]

## II

The RSS sees itself as contesting an alienated and denationalising heritage left behind by Macaulay and his ilk which, it says, continues to inform the present educational mainstream. It aims to replace this with a system whose single-minded aim is to implant in the child's mind a single slogan – *Bharatmata ki jai*. This is, they say, the true national education that teaches the student to be proud of his/her Hindu heritage. Which is why, instead of calling themselves schools, RSS educational institutions call themselves mandirs, i.e. temples. The Indianisation of concepts is obviously taken to mean their simultaneous Hinduisation since a mandir is a Hindu place of worship. In other words, education begins with planting a basic and primary confusion and conflation between Hindu and Indian.

The professed primary aim also includes the *remaking* of the nation. Here the pedagogical aim becomes explicitly and very directly political and immediately links with the RSS design of a Hindu Rashtra. This is to be achieved through a combination of ancestral values and knowledge, i.e. Hindu knowledge, with highly modern technology. Education therefore neatly selects and stitches together two isolated and unrelated streams and excludes everything else. Western knowledge, which has repeatedly been denounced as alienated and corrupting, is brought in to form one of the two constitutive elements of knowledge, in the shape of technological knowhow. Yet it is delinked from associated developments in the critical rationalism and scientific

[8] Ibid.

explorations wherein it is embedded. Thus, cleansed and tamed, and debarred from intellectual curiosity and questioning, it is safely reinserted into approved modes of learning as mere mechanical skill. Hindu knowledge, of course, is a tradition that has necessarily to be invented in modern times and contexts since the very notion of a single homogenised Hindu is an ahistorical ideological construct. Since the RSS has promoted itself as the self-appointed guardian of all matters Hindu, Hindu knowledge by definition becomes knowledge prescribed by the RSS.

Since the aim is to compete with mainstream education and subvert it insidiously from within, rather than develop a comprehensive alternative, Vidya Bharati functions within the established format of the syllabus and examination pattern of the various states. At middle and high school levels, for instance, it even prescribes and uses the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) social science textbooks, which the RSS otherwise maligns at every opportunity as false and pseudo-secular. The reason is that these are regarded in the textbook market as the most comprehensive and successful books available, and Vidya Bharati students cannot afford to ignore them if they are to compete with students from different kinds of schools. However, it inserts its own unique and indelible signature within the schools in three distinct ways.

In all the schools in Delhi that we visited, there is a striking visual display of Hindu political symbols that blend militancy with sacredness. The two are then contained within a framework that is explicitly political and unmistakably oriented towards the RSS. Ram's pictures are ubiquitous and several headmasters and headmistresses sported VHP posters and prints, calendars and small icons, in their offices. Hindu leaders who had fought against "Muslims", such as Rana Pratap and Shivaji, were also omni-

present, as were the portraits of Hedgewar, founder of the RSS, and Golwalkar, its ideologue. The RSS map of undivided India, straddled by a divine Bharatmàta, was also much in evidence.[9] There are, furthermore, annual inter-school events involving competitions in knowledge of the epics and other sacred texts, as well as in Sanskrit.[10]

At assembly time, the school heads often make speeches about current political issues on which the Sangh combine has been active. The Ayodhya temple issue was often brought up with such a wealth of emotion that, a headmistress told us proudly, even five-year-olds clenched their fists in anger and vengeance.[11] Sometimes overtly political activists were brought in from the outside to address students on current themes. The headmaster of the Hari Nagar senior secondary school went to Ayodhya as a *kar sevak* in October 1990, and several students of the school accompanied him. Their exploits and their encounters with Mulayam Singh Yadav's law and order forces were elaborately recounted and became part of the cherished collective memory of the school.

There are certain carefully instilled ritual and extra-curricular practices that reinforce proper *samskaras* among students. Not only are a number of Hindu ritual occasions and festivals meticulously observed, but there is always a temple, either within the school premises or in the close vicinity. They are a part of regular school life for every student. Students are expected to touch their elders' feet every morning in order to be drilled into habits of deference and proper Hindu forms of greeting. Since

[9] Saraswati Shishu Mandir at Sabzi Mandi and Jhandewalan and Saraswati Bal Mandirs at Ramakrishnapuram, Jhandewalan and Hari Nagar.

[10] Samarth Shishu Samiti, *Samarth Sandesh*, Delhi 1990.

[11] Saraswati Shishu Mandir, Sabzi Mandi.

children of the new generation find Western ways of birthday celebrations – with cakes, candles, and games – more fun, the school has an alternative mode of celebrating birthdays observed for each individual student. In a public ceremony, the sacred lamp is ritually lit, the student is garlanded and blessed by teachers who recite Sanskrit holy chants, and an audio cassette of patriotic and religious songs is played. These cassettes are for sale in every school in the hope that they will travel beyond school events and take their place within familial ones. The point of the alternative format is not to counter the forces of conspicuous and competitive consumerism that birthday celebrations often involve, but to shield students from anything foreign and non-Hindu. Even during school picnics, a somewhat disenchanted ex-student of the Hari Nagar school told us, entertainment was limited to devotional music.[12] There is also a constant endeavour to mix the domestic space of the student with the institutional space, since the student must carry school instruction into familial interaction. This is strengthened by very frequent parent–teacher meetings and the cultivation of close ties between the students' families and individual teachers who visit students at their homes.[13] The students, who are recruited from neighbourhood areas, are entry points for RSS institutions and organisations into larger localities.

The strongest instrument for the making of desirable students are additional courses that are compulsory in these schools. There is a strong, almost mystical emphasis on physical culture, including yogic practices that are considered to be invested with extra-physical moral properties. Not only are they meant to turn

[12] Interview with an ex-student, then a postgraduate student of Delhi University, March 1991.

[13] Interview with teachers at schools mentioned above.

students into formidable soldiers of the Hindu nation, they also impart spiritual qualities. Yoga, especially, is considered a uniquely Hindu way of developing physical and spiritual strength in mutual harmony. The Yoga Room at the Hari Nagar school is also used for meditation.

There are special courses on Sanskrit that feature modern Sanskrit publications, promoting RSS values, and teaching spoken Sanskrit brought out by the Daivavani Prakashan at Kurukshetra. Interestingly, studies of classical Sanskrit literature are entirely neglected while modern pieces on suitable themes are publicised.[14] There is also a special department of music that has a programme graded according to age. Again, training in classical music is discounted in favour of modern devotional music and patriotic songs. The cultural instruments of the Sangh combine unite with pedagogic tools to promote an exceptionally totalitarian and monochromatic ideological orientation.

There are, finally, courses on "Indian civilisation", again graded according to age, with textbooks for each year and compulsory examinations. The textbooks follow a brief question–answer format, providing information about geography, cultural features, historical events, and even science that, in a seemingly objective, terse manner, not only distort real events in contemporary and historical life, but also Hinduise each feature of India. Heroes, whether historical or mythological, are uniformly Hindus and overwhelmingly upper caste. Rivers and mountains have sacred associations. Cities are given approximate ancient Hindu names, whether the identification with modern places is accurate or not. Each modern city is described with the nearest Hindu pilgrimage site carefully mentioned. Scientific information, whether on physics or mathematics, is always concluded with Hindu textual

[14] *Alternative Model of National Education*, op. cit.

approximation mentioned as the real source of that knowledge. History is full of brave upper-caste men and women who have fought Muslims. There is a confident disregard of authenticated detail, and of boundaries between myth and reality – of the kind that might please postmodernists. Heroes include epic, mythological, historical figures and deities in equal proportion within the same category, without mention of the differences. Again, through a judicious process of mixing and blurring, struggles between divine figures and demons, between colonial rule and nationalists, and between Hindus and Muslims are depicted in such a way that demons, colonialists, and Muslims occupy the same undifferentiated space within a continuous narrative structure. The textbook for Class IV also includes an account of the police firing on the mob that had tried to demolish the Babri Masjid in October–November 1990 with photographs of "martyrs". A whole lot of seemingly precise information about disjointed queries is actually systematically organised to project a communal myth as sacred narrative and nationalist history, with no distinction between the two. This orientation is conveyed through a wide range of topics which methodically produce an overarching Hindu supremacism disguised as nationalism. Photographs of Sangh "martyrs" are integral to this orientation and part of the syllabus for children.

The syllabus is genuinely ungendered and courses are the same for boys and girls. Girls are given additional training in domestic science which, however, is common to most other schools. Gender ideology is inculcated through an insistence on the supremacy of parental decisions that must prevail over the girl's choice in educational, professional, and marital decisions.[15]

[15] See Tanika Sarkar, "The Woman as Communal Subject: The Rashtrasevika Samiti and Ramjanmabhoomi Movement", above.

Home-grown gender notions manifest themselves in essays written by students for Vidya Bharati magazines. A student of Class VIII wrote about the wife of the mythological sage Atri. Some gods wanted to test her chastity and demanded that she should strip completely and breast-feed them. She, with her husband's consent, did just that, but with such a maternal aura that her chastity remained inviolate and the gods drank her milk with blameless filial emotions.[16] Again, given the uniformly "heroic" mould of self-destructive and necessarily violent ways of proving individual worth, against the Muslims or the British, it is not out of place that either a demonstration of chastity should be demanded of the woman, or that it takes shape as an act of great violence to her own disposition and sensibilities. Again, the same value is upheld in textbooks on Bharatiya Sanskriti, which abound with examples of satis or women whose self-destruction as proof of their love for dead husbands filled them with supernatural powers that could then be used to destroy their enemies.[17]

Mainstream schools also use textbooks that are equally marked by an ubiquitous accent on martyrdom in a nationalist and religious cause as the highest value in human life. And here, too, there is only a short step from dying to killing, virtue being often equated with the willingness to kill. History becomes a way of asserting the greatness of one's country, uncritical and unquestioning celebration of its many great men (and a few great women), and a masking of the problems of poverty, exploitation, inequality, and corruption in high places. Many of the poems

[16] Sandip Arora, Saraswati Bal Mandir, Jhandewalan, *Samarth Sandesh*. The textbook also abounds with accounts of satis and of the submissive chastity of ancient women, sadly missing in the modern world.

[17] The example of "sati" Kannegi is often invoked. See, for example, textbook for Class IV, Sanskriti Gyan Parekha Series, op. cit.

in the Hindi textbook used in a progressive Delhi school, for instance, are also part of an RSS songbook that is prescribed in the *shakhas*.[18] Heroes, in any case, are in all schoolbooks almost always upper caste and Hindu. It is a strength of the RSS pedagogical system that it does not really have to force a departure from established mainstream nationalist thinking. It simply closes off the multifarious possibilities and alternatives that are also available within it and brings to their logical extreme some other possibilities that are latent.

## III

RSS schools in Delhi are almost invariably situated in a distinctive milieu. They are either in neighbourhoods filled with shopkeepers, petty traders, small factory owners and business people, or are mostly occupied by middle-ranking service people. Their students are drawn from these areas and few come from distant places. The monthly fees are about Rs 100 for primary schools and Rs 150 for higher schools. The aim is to have a fee structure that will occupy a middle position between the expensive and exclusive public schools and the cheaper model schools run by the government.[19]

There are practically no non-Hindus and few low-caste students. In fact, the students had been very agitated over the V.P. Singh government's decision to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations for affirmative action for backward castes. A number of students are from RSS families and attend their daily *shakhas*. A very large number of teachers and

[18] We owe this information to Neeraj Pant and Aditya Sarkar.

[19] Interviews with the headmistresses of Saraswati Shishu Mandirs of Sabzi Mandi and Jhandewalan.

almost all heads of school are similarly recruited from RSS families. The others are methodically trained at regular teachers' training camps that are meant to provide orientation in Sangh values. There is, then, an exceptionally high degree of social cohesiveness and homogeneity.

The broad purpose is to give the petite bourgeoisie – even now the most firm and primary social base of the Sangh – a sense of purpose and confidence in relation to the students of more assured upper-middle-class backgrounds who have access to and ease in dealing with a more exclusive Anglicised education. It is also to integrate students from RSS milieus more closely with their family training and values. With school hours in daytime and *shakha*s in the early morning or evening, the whole day is disciplined by various agencies of the Sangh, stretching from family to school and *shakha*, in an unbroken and totalitarian circuit of influence and training. The schools, with a committed lot of teachers and a good record of discipline, also act as pivotal points of RSS influence within entire localities, where they function in conjunction with other RSS facilities. All these areas are usually also equipped with RSS and VHP offices and, therefore, operate within a broader orbit of Sangh activity which they help to deepen and extend. We have remarked elsewhere that a difference between the Sangh combine and the classic fascist organisations is that the accent is on recruitment at an infant rather than at a youth level.[20] The school is therefore an important ingredient in the making of the Right-wing Hindu whose basic dispositions need to be structured from the time of his/her earliest training. If the first RSS *shakha* was founded primarily to train upper-caste Hindus in leadership qualities and to prepare

[20] Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, op. cit.

them for hegemonic functions within a deeply divided Hindu community at a time of social turmoil and communal trouble, the schools serve the same purpose, adding academic training to the repertoire. They have been planned to occupy larger slices of the time and the minds of the children of the Hindu Right who cannot be caught too young.

# 6

# Problems of Social Power in the Discourses of the Hindu Right

On 13 May 2004, in a historic reversal of Indian electoral fortunes, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was dislodged from power. Commenting on the event, the *Wall Street Journal* wondered if India was really suited for "competitive electoral politics" (read "democracy"). It suggested that the verdict of the Indian people went against the mandate of another electorate that is no less important: global investors.[1] The preference of global investors, or of multinational capital, for a chauvinistic anti-Christian political force which abhors Western cultural and political values may seem paradoxical. It is even more difficult to understand how the Sangh combine manages to blend two apparently dichotomous compulsions. The task is enormously complicated as the RSS and its mass fronts

This is a revised version of Tanika Sarkar, "Problems of Social Power and the Discourses of the Hindu Right", in R. Ray and M. Katzenstein, eds, *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power and Politics*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

[1] Cited by P. Sainath in the *Hindu*, 1 June 2004.

speak in many different, even contradictory, voices to address mutually opposed constituencies. I can merely suggest a few clues by tracing some of the changes in the combine's social thinking as it responded to changing political climates.

From its inception in 1925 the RSS, as is well known, steadfastly kept away from all phases of all anti-colonial movements. In their place it developed an agenda of a Hindu nation-state to deny the equality of all Indian religions, thereby implicitly refusing Muslims and Christians substantive citizenship. Western political and economic domination therefore lay outside its concerns during colonial rule and none of its ideologues made any significant observations on imperialism, far less developed a critical political discourse. At the same time, however, the RSS formulated a coherent opposition to several universalisable values such as equality, social justice, and democracy, all of which, it said, were of foreign origin and thus illegitimate aspirations for India and its Hindu culture.

By the same measure, the organisation denied that there were exploitative power relations within the Hindu bloc. The Sangh was founded at a moment when the Indian political horizon had been rendered radically unstable through a number of experiments which stretched the limits of the possible. The Congress–Khilafat movements solicited tribal-peasant participation in anti-colonial politics, and the response was overwhelming. The interweaving of elite nationalism and mass upsurges did, to an extent, regulate subaltern militancy along pre-selected channels. At the same time subaltern solicitation had its own logic that exceeded simple elite manipulation. It decisively expanded subaltern bargaining power and self-esteem. Moreover, the national movement was based on Hindu–Muslim unity on a scale that was unique post-1857.

Outside Congress movements, women's organisations had already made a mark with their demands for greater gender justice and for the right to franchise. Left movements, taking coherent shape from the 1920s by commanding trade unions and launching widespread strike waves as well as agrarian insurrections, at times worried the colonial state far more than did the Congress movements. What was perhaps most worrying for the Hindu social leadership was the powerful upsurge in Dalit and non-Brahman movements in western and southern India. In their different ways these diverse and sometimes mutually acrimonious struggles underscored the emergence of new political norms and values: those of self-determination and equal rights among nations, races, sexes, castes, and classes.[2]

V.D. Savarkar, ideological guru of the Hindu Right, had his own explanation of India's primary socio-political conflicts and contradictions. An erstwhile revolutionary terrorist who had spent long years in the Andaman prisons, and a man who in his own life defied caste taboos and taught his disciples to do so, he published a text in 1923 that, nonetheless, displaced and obscured problems of colonialism and social, caste, and class conflict. He wrote that the chief point of contention was between on the one hand Hindus, and on the other "non-Indians" whose fatherland, land of action, and land of holy places were not within the boundaries of Bharat. Since their faith had been born outside, they too were irremediably outsiders. Geography and faith were conjoined to lay the basis for Hindutva's concept of citizenship. Class asymmetries were not recognised as a problem area in his text, but the very silence indicated deep anxieties, especially

[2] For a concise account of this period, see Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, Delhi and London: Macmillan, 1983.

about caste, which belied the claim to Hindu unity – to the organic indivisibility of the community. Caste, let us remember, is inseparably interlinked with class, since labour arrangements by and large follow caste lines.

Savarkar also said that the "lower" castes are descendants of aboriginal people whom Aryan upper-caste invaders had annexed. However, over the centuries, miscegenation had mixed up blood lines along caste and racial lines, resulting in a complete fusion and cross-caste kinship ties, and thus in a mixed yet unified Hindu family. Shared blood, therefore, admitted asymmetries but negated their significance; social differences were overshadowed by common blood ties.[3]

Dr Hedgewar, who founded the first RSS *shakha* (daily training centre) for boys in 1925, provided an organisational focus to concretise the message. Especially disturbed by the social consequences of the Gandhian movements, he wrote at length about "the evils in social life that the movement had generated", referring specifically to "Brahman–non-Brahman conflicts", and to "yavana snakes reared on the milk of Non-Cooperation".[4] His Sangh tried to draw the youth of "pure" castes and affluent classes away from the anti-colonial upsurge and align them to the RSS alternative, which provided them with ideological and combat training in anti-Muslim sentiment.

Within two years of its foundation, the Sangh had proved its

[3] V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* 6th edn., Delhi: Bharti Sahitya Sadan, 1989. See also Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2003. For an excellent study of Hindutva ideology in general, see Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001.

[4] Cited in C.P. Bhishikar, *Keshub Sanohnirmata*, Pune, 1979. Hindi translation, Delhi, 1980, p. 7.

mettle by provoking a riot against Muslims in Nagpur.[5] By 1940, Nagpur-based shakhas began to acquire an all-India character. If we look at the chronology of its spread, we find a striking coincidence between moments of rapid growth and the peaking of communal violence. Founded in 1925, in the middle of the first wave of country-wide communal strife, the next major spurt, which took it beyond its western–central India confines, was between 1937 and 1940, when strife was in the air again. This time, contact had been made with Punjab, Delhi, the United Provinces and Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and the Karnataka region. Shakhas now totalled about four hundred, with approximately 100,000 members in all.[6]

Recruitment in the 1940s was confined to the same castes and classes as in the 1920s, albeit in larger proportions: urban students, traders and shopkeepers, and junior members of the bureaucracy.[7] The RSS clearly rested on a petit bourgeois class base made up largely of a vernacular elite: urban educated men trained in local vernacular-medium institutions in non-metropolitan places who were deeply resentful of metropolitan cultural influences, as well as hostile to the Urdu courtly culture of the North Indian Muslim gentry. These were also upper-caste people with deeply conservative Brahmanical habits and values, fearful of "low-caste" and women's movements, and of class struggles.

Subsequently the RSS, under the dynamic ideological and organisational control of M.S. Golwalkar, brought to such people a vision of moral leadership.[8] Golwalkar visualised upper-caste

[5] See Tapan Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993, pp. 18–20.

[6] Ibid.

[7] See J.A. Curran, *Militant Hinduism in Indian Politics: A Study of the RSS*, New York: Institute of Public Relations, 1951, pp. 18–19.

[8] Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts*, op. cit.

and middle-class hegemony based on a modified version of Brahmanical *samskaras* (dispositions), where inherited powers were to be expanded with acquired virtues and training in leadership qualities. The vanguard would then fan out among wider social circles, acquiring mass bases through a certain amount of charitable work. Mobilisation, however, would be secured above all through communal ideology and its institutionalised transmission through daily *shakha* sessions.[9]

In 1946–7, when the Partition of India produced its own version of the Holocaust, anti-Muslim campaigns appeared a self-fulfilling prophecy. The country was mentally partitioned between warring communities even before the formal territorial division came through. This is not to say that the RSS was responsible for all or most of the violence,[10] but it did benefit enormously from it. The violence seemed to confirm its assertions of a unified Hindu community pitted against Muslims. Memories – real, distorted, and constructed – of the Indian holocaust also proved a valuable asset, recasting the future in terms of the past and endowing subsequent conflicts with powerful echoes from the past. Along with the Hindu Mahasabha, RSS cadres were very active in relief work among Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Punjab.

Before the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a man who

[9] That orientation remains unchanged. In fact, the RSS has little more to offer that would carry its own distinctive stamp. See, for instance, a documentary based on a *shakha* for infants in Nagpur City, Lalit Vachani's, "The Boy in the Branch", Channel Four, 1991.

[10] Although it did accomplish a lot more than we know, as the archival documents collected by the anti-colonial *Towards Freedom* volumes (Delhi: Oxford University Press, various dates) on those years bear out. Significantly, the BJP human resources minister has forbidden the further publication of such volumes.

had earlier trained with the RSS, their organisational activities were in good health. Unlike the Congress or the Communist Party of India, the Sangh had never faced colonial repression, bans, or a precarious underground existence. Its resources had remained intact and indeed flourished before the Second World War began and praise of Nazi Germany became contraband in British India. Golwalkar published a highly significant text in 1938 in which he described the Jewish policies of the Nazis as the ideal model for the treatment of minorities in India.[11] Gandhi's assassination, however, led to a brief ban on the organisation, and to an upsurge of popular anger against it. The Sangh now retired to a brief period of purely constructive work: it started a chain of schools to be run on RSS principles.[12]

Now began a slow and patient cellular expansion, through shakhas, for men, women, and schools. So far, the Sangh ideology had fed off the time-tested sentiments of ethnic hatred and ethnic pride. After Independence, however, a new language and mode of organisation became unavoidable. For the first time, universal adult franchise and representative democracy made the political choices of most Indians the key player in politics; and most Indians have always been poor, labouring men and women, many of them "low caste".

In his articles of the late 1940s, Golwalkar railed against the constitution: "Democracy will poison the peace and tranquillity of the human mind and disrupt mutual harmony of individuals

[11] M.S. Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Publication, 1939, p. 27. The passage praising Nazi anti-Semitism was retained in the third edition in 1945, even after the full horrors of Hitler's Final Solution had become known worldwide.

[12] "Educating the Children of the Hindu Rashtra: Notes on RSS Schools", ch. 4 above.

in society . . . Not equality but harmony . . . monarchy was found to be a highly beneficial institution, continuing for thousands of years, showering peace and prosperity on the whole of our people." He found the idea of universal literacy and education troublesome for possibly making people question his notion of social harmony.[13] And what should be the basis of a social harmony incompatible with equality, parliamentary democracy, and even universal education? He cited the Purushasukta verse from the Rig Veda that propounds the theological basis of caste:

> From His mouth came brahmans, from His arms the Kshatriyas
> From His thighs appeared Vaishyas, and Shudras came out of His feet.[14]

He reiterated in no uncertain terms that the constitution was a disaster and demanded that it be amended. He argued that if it was no longer possible for India to go back to monarchical tranquillity, then at the very least parliamentary democracy needed to be replaced by the election of representatives exclusively from the respectable professions.[15] In other words, the electorate should only elect professionals who would, by definition in a country like India, come from the upper castes and middle classes – and be mostly men. The Sangh itself, he declared, is not made up of "all kinds of people from the lower strata of social life where people act together like crows flocking together for a piece of flesh."[16]

[13] "Challenge of the Times" (1949), included in M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, Bangalore: Jagarana Prakashan, 1960, pp. 24–6.

[14] Ibid., p. 36.

[15] Ibid., p. 26.

[16] Ibid., p. 49.

Expressing the visceral distaste of a pure-bred and strictly vegetarian Maharashtrian Brahman for meat, the simile reveals the Sangh's profound repugnance for democracy. The idea remained hidden but has proved tenacious. As soon as the BJP-led government came to power at the centre, it renewed its critique of the constitution and set up a commission to suggest possible revisions. A recent draft constitution, produced in the name of the RSS students' wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, suggests that the Lok Sabha be guided by a transcendent Gurusabha – obviously, largely composed of upper-caste Hindu teachers. It should be chosen by an electorate in which each teacher had thirty votes. The Gurusabha's command was intended to prevail against the mandate of the Lok Sabha, which is elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. Under this draft, franchise becomes weighted, its teeth drawn out by an elite that can countermand its decisions.[17]

This critique of democracy was founded on democracy's supposedly alien origin. Golwalkar identified both equality and democracy as Western "materialist" and "individualist" values inappropriate and improper for Indians. They would, he warned, destroy the social fabric, unleashing competition and struggles for power among social classes, and could even lead to that great evil of our time, socialism. They breed conflict, he pointed out, between "the labour and the industrialist".[18] So, "Purge Present Perversions", he thundered, and bring back "ancient samsakaras" prescribed by *varnavyavastha* (the sacred institution of caste). Caste has always served as "a great bond of social cohesion" and

[17] This Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad pamphlet circulated in 1999–2000 in Delhi University circles. I am grateful to Aditya Nigam for providing me a copy.

[18] Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, pp. 40–1.

prevented the stimulation of unhealthy "caste ego", which the present state machinery encourages. India, minus the constitutional order and democracy, would become a land of born-again Hindus keeping each caste in its place and thereby ensure social peace and harmony.[19] The Sangh's moral vision and political ideology came then to be founded on an explicit and articulate opposition to the values of egalitarianism and social justice.

## III

Tragically for itself, the Sangh had to survive in a democratic India. Quite belatedly, therefore, it started an electoral wing – the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), ancestor of the present BJP, in order to contest the Nerhruvian strategies of a planned economy, an enlarged public sector, and a state whose self-image was secular. The electoral front was a relatively late development, coming well after the fronts for women and students had emerged in the 1930s and '40s.

The BJS, however, was confronted by a political terrain remarkably resistant to Sangh aspirations. A commitment to at least formal social equality had emerged as a deeply ingrained value in the political sphere, and an explicit refutation of it would have been suicidal for a formation that aspired to political authority and social power. Contrary to what the Sangh said, democracy was not an alien and superficial grafting but had strong roots in very recent and powerful experiences of mass struggles: against factory owners, upper castes, landlords, and above all the colonial state. A softer articulation of Sangh desires became an urgent necessity in this new context. The Sangh combine and

[19] Ibid., pp. 110–16.

its electoral front now required discursive strategies that would affirm parliamentary norms and yet surround and overwhelm them with social values that went back to the "social peace and harmony" that had been put in place by the hierarchies of caste, class, and gender.

Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, founder of the BJS, delivered a series of lectures in 1965 which were published as a book called *Integral Humanism*. This book bypassed the customary abuse of Muslims and even echoed Congress promises about full employment and free education. It did not, however, provide a single clue as to how these would be achieved, nor to what had caused their absence. It did not talk about Indian poverty but repeated, instead, Golwalkar's strictures against the materialistic individualism of the capitalist path as well as against the materialist tyranny of the socialist bloc. In fact, it chose not to engage with material needs and interests, for that seemed a realm that spiritually minded Indians ought to do without. The seemingly bland message – of a middle path between capitalism and socialism, and some relief and prospects for subalterns – though without any precise direction, typically precludes critical analyses of Indian poverty, the class character of the state, and the contradictions within civil society. It was a large silence intended to help the status quo. Upadhyaya suggests a social order which avoids the welfarist social compact that the Congress promised (at least in its rhetoric). Instead, he pursues the notion of an organic body politic where the structure is born and not made, a divinely ordained substance which is non-negotiable. This is an organ of interrelated and mutually sustaining parts. Because it is born that way, it would be unnatural to transform the hierarchies of class and caste, for to attempt that would violently disrupt the organism. Asymmetries are then fated to remain so, unless we positively desire social chaos and anarchy.

Upadhyaya introduced one other significant argument against social strife. He insisted that the BJS was opposed to the essential and indivisible unity of the Indian "soul", an entity that falls apart when there are references to difference. To focus on class or caste divisions therefore amounts to a social partition. The threat of social separatism was a powerful weapon, evoking dreadful resonances and memories for a country that had recently lived through the horrors of a territorial partition.

The relatively quietist cadences of Sangh conservatism began to falter in the 1970s and 1980s.[20] There were massive Dalit upsurges in Gujarat, and the Sangh and BJP were drawn into battle as ferocious champions of the upper castes. Dalit cultural and political formations like the Panthers were extremely critical of the Manusamhita, the ancient prescriptive order of Brahmanical patriarchy. There were secessionist movements in the border zones where Hindus did not dominate. Above all, the BJP's fortunes in parliament remained weak. By the 1980s the tone of sweet reasonableness that Upadhyaya had professed began to wear rather thin and appear unproductive. It was time to abandon it in favour of a mass-based Right-wing movement – the first of its kind for the Sangh, one guided by upper-caste Hindus, and funded and aided generously by Non-Resident Indians (NRIs).[21]

Middle-class NRIs in Britain, the United States, and Canada

[20] Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, *Integral Humanism: Some Basic Elements* (1965). For a standard RSS hagiographical account, see C.P. Bhishikar, in *Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya: Ideology and Perception*, part V, Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 1991. See also Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

[21] On Sangh work in the West, see Parita Mukta and Chetan Bhatt, eds, "Hindutva Movements in the West: Resurgent Hinduism and the Politics of Diaspora", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, May 2000.

in particular have been a vitally important addition to the Sangh orbit of influence and resources from the time of Independence. Affluent, successful, professional people with considerable local clout in their adopted countries, these Hindus simultaneously experience a lack of cultural recognition within them. To align their cultural status with their socioeconomic status, they require a vision of Indian traditions that corresponds to the recent BJP slogan "India Shining". They seek their lineage in a glorious ancestry and are deeply suspicious of self-reflexive versions of India's past and traditions that dim their notion of past lustre by references to caste, class, and gender oppression within the Hindu world. Living far from India, they can afford to forget the harsh realities of the present and the cruelties of the past that have shaped them. The RSS cultivates close links with these diaspora Hindus through lecture tours, temple building, and youth-counselling activities. They reassure conservative parents abroad who are worried about the break-up of caste and kinship forms in a different cultural and social environment, about mixed marriages and rebellious progeny. They also massage the vulnerable egos of successful but racially marginalised Indians uncertain of their heritage and self-esteem in white-dominated societies.[22] At the same time, while this class of people revel in their imagined tradition and bask in the conviction of self-superiority to the West where they live, few of them take part in anti-racist movements in the Anglo-Saxon worlds. NRIs have been, despite a number of remarkable exceptions, politically docile and self-contained. They have managed to gain, thereby, the approval of their countries of habitation.

[22] See H.V. Sheshadri, K.S. Sudarshan, K. Surya Narayan Rao, and Balraj Madhok, *Why Hindu Rashtra?*, Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 1990.

The multicultural politics of countries like Britain usually imagine Indians as monolithic and conservative religious communities living according to ancient and orthodox customs and cultures. Orientalist habits clearly die hard. Therefore, much Western political patronage has come the way of the West-based VHP, and they have gained important positions in local governance as safe and authentic representatives of their communities.[23] They have thus emerged as cherished allies in the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

## IV

The Ramjanmabhoomi movement to demolish the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya began quietly. Anti-Muslim pogroms at Meerut and Maliana and Bhagalpur in the mid and late 1980s were generally ascribed to purely local tensions and rather less to the VHP's *shilanyas* and *shilapujan* ceremonies at Ayodhya. At times, sections of Dalits could be pressed into action against Muslims, as at Old Delhi in 1986, and at Nizamuddin in South Delhi in 1990. The logic of Sanskritisation prevailed: camaraderie, even leadership in communal violence, was the kind of emulation of pure caste conduct that knitted the despised castes more closely to the Hindu community. It gave them access to a measure of self-esteem and community-belonging that their caste situation otherwise precluded.

Ramjanmabhoomi campaigns were masterminded by the ecclesiastical or religious wing of the RSS, the VHP. They made great strides among the NRIs as well as among the monastic sects and temple authorities of major religious sites in India.[24]

[23] Ibid.

[24] Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Founded in 1964 to combat Christianity in India's north-east, the VHP turned against Muslims from 1981 in the wake of the mass conversions of Dalits to Islam at Meenakshipuram. The exit option that conversion provides for these most exploited of Hindus had to be sealed off. The VHP had, since then, orchestrated much of the organised violence against Christians and Muslims. Freed from electoral compulsions and constraints that a parliamentary party needs to reckon with, and not always directly connected with the RSS by the media, it could be reckless in open solicitations of mob fury to an extent not possible for other wings of the Sangh.

The logic of a Sangh-driven Hindu unity founded on communal violence – a unity that bypasses the critique of social inequality among Hindus – crashed with the United Front government's endorsement of the Mandal Commission recommendations which proposed the extension of job reservations to Other Backward Castes in 1990. The Brahmanical face of the RSS was unveiled when its mouthpiece, the *Organiser*, invoked Manu in despair and railed openly against a "shudra revolution". Abuse of "low castes", so far carefully excised from its public vocabulary, resurfaced with naked force.[25]

In 1994 the writer and journalist M.V. Kamath counselled sobriety and pacification through an extension of hegemonic exercises among the "low castes", saying that "There is urgent need to build up moral and spiritual forces to counter any fallout from the expected Shudra revolution. Already one smells violence in the air."[26] In 1996 the RSS adopted rural schemes to contact "lower" castes and Adivasis, and to promote "social assimilation

[25] See *Organiser*, 26 August 1996.

[26] Cited in *Organiser*, 1 May 1994.

and harmony".[27] Co-opted "low-caste" leaders such as Uma Bharati and Bangaru Laxman were put on display in their public campaigns. The cellular mode of mass mobilisation of earlier times was now significantly expanded and a large number of new grassroots institutions came up to penetrate various social groups.

The mobilisation of workers proceeded simultaneously, with a reinforced critique of social justice. A leader of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), the RSS trade union at the Bokaro Steel plant, told us that labour strikes are "anti-national . . . Rashtrahit first, mazdoorhit second", as though the nation were distinct from workers.[28] The BMS leader Dattopant Thengde similarly castigated the notion of equality and rights in the case of gender. At the same time, from the 1980s spectacular communal violence was revived to strengthen mass mobilisation.[29]

## V

With a masterly calibration of collective, trans-class, trans-caste, non-gendered acts of violence and a conceptual apparatus that stigmatised the politics of rights, the Sangh developed something like a moral economy of communalism. In 1998 the BJP came to power at the centre, but only as a dominant partner in

[27] See Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, eds, *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. See also Eri Kakuta, "Hindu Nationalist Views on Rural Development: A Case Study of the Deendayal Research Institute's Chitrakoot Project", in *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies*, 15, 2003.

[28] Interview with S.K. Verma, 4 April 1990. Cited in Basu, *et al., Khaki Shorts*, op. cit.

[29] Cited in Tanika Sarkar, "The Gender Predicament of the Hindu Right", in K.N. Panikkar, ed., *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, Delhi: Viking Press, 1999.

a coalition. To achieve even this it had to qualify its policy of co-opting underprivileged groups in favour of tactical alliances with parties that had "low-caste" bases. Their own class basis remained stagnant at best, even though the BJP funnelled governmental funds for relief and charity through party organisations to buy subaltern support.[30]

At the same time, while their primary support base has not changed and even as the class–caste composition of the cadre base remains intact, the BJP's electoral fortunes in 1998 indicate that a secondary range of electoral support has been created among the upper and middle classes in metropolitan cities and big towns. If the Sangh combine grew as a vernacular elite, then why and how have its aspirations found a resonance in the more exalted circles of metropolitan elites, big business connected to multinationals, and the media?

We need to touch on some profound and long-term reorientations in mainstream middle-class social thinking. Since colonial times, Indian nationalism had represented the country as desperately poor and founded its critique of colonialism on the poverty and economic backwardness of the country. Post-colonial regimes continued that characterisation, albeit with a great deal of optimism for the future. They adhered to a vision of complete economic sovereignty and independent capitalist development under a planned economy that would provide some basic services to the poor and the illiterate. They accepted the principle of affirmative action for Dalits. A growing public sector provided a measure of social security to workers and farming was minimally subsidised – even though the vast informal economic sector lay outside the sphere of concern. Most of these policies

[30] See Kakuta, "Hindu Nationalist Views on Rural Development", op. cit.

remained solely on paper, while the poor continued to live their lives without a significant safety net. Nonetheless, the tenacity of certain principles cleared an ideological space for the contest against poverty and exploitation.

The economic changes of the last two decades, especially as driven by Structural Adjustment policies, have significantly shifted the basis of such earlier self-perception. The entire post-colonial phase is now dismissed as a failure, its roots being traced to surpassed goals of economic self-determination and the philosophy of public welfare. Indian elites are now eager to participate in global markets as privileged consumers, while some of the world's important multinational corporations have emerged from Indian origins. The state, in this phase of capitalism, is equally eager to buy national and international financial support with a policy of compliance with a deregulated market. It is increasingly abandoning its proclaimed role as mediator among class interests. Above all, the now-triumphalist Indian middle classes have become disinclined to dwell upon poverty or to see little beyond what it considers signs of the nation's greatness: Pokhran, Kargil, IT technological progress, the boom in conspicuous consumption, the dazzle of commodities, Indian and Western. In this situation, the NDA acquired political power at the centre and made its historic compromise with the forces of national and international capital. A new social compact has been forged, indicating the radical departure from Upadhyaya's anti-materialist philosophy as well as from the economic nationalism of the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch – which had in any case opposed subaltern struggles for rights and justice.

The BJP advocates a militaristic and nuclearised India and claims to embody the purest essence of Indian nationalism. When in power, however, its economic policies, paradoxically,

faithfully continue the International Monetary Fund and World Bank-driven liberalisation regime. Under the rule of the BJP-led NDA, India was opened up to foreign investments on rather easy terms, much of the public sector was folded back, a newly created ministry of disinvestment sold off the country's profitable public sector industries,[31] and a hire-and-fire labour policy was sought to be imposed on a labour force that knows no safety net or security of livelihood and survival.[32] Farmers' subsidies were reduced or cancelled. Ecologically unsafe big dam projects were developed which drove out masses of rural and tribal people from their habitat with no prospects of rehabilitation. Public welfare investments were reduced in favour of the development of new information technology projects. Its election manifesto celebrated the entire economic package as "India Shining" under BJP guidance. The mass media did not, by and large, question the government's claims. Some secular journalists hoped in vain that the accent on development indicated a party now mature enough to turn away from Hindu extremism.

In the meantime, in Andhra Pradesh thousands of farmers in the throes of extreme distress were taking their own lives,[33] the savings of pensioners and the lower middle classes were devastated by the reduction in interest rates on small savings, and many urban labourers were thrown onto the streets as public sector industries faced closure. It was a classic case of the emperor's new

[31] See the official website of the ministry for more information: http// divest.nic.in/.

[32] The new government is less sympathetic to this policy. See "CMP Rejects 'Hire and Fire' Labour Policy", *Deccan Herald*, 28 May 2004.

[33] See, for example, Amy Waldman's reportage on this issue in the *New York Times* on 14 May 2004 and 7 June 2004.

clothes: nobody could actually see the splendour, but everybody said the clothes were shining bright.[34]

Admittedly, the neo-liberal turn in economic policies was initiated by Rajiv Gandhi's Structural Adjustment reforms and driven by World Bank and International Monetary Fund pressures in the early 1990s. In relation to political repression as well, the Congress had introduced the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Acts in the name of preventing secessionism in the north-east and, later, in Kashmir. The Congress had been behind some spectacular communalism during the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Nonetheless, there are certain qualitative distinctions between the Sangh combine and the Congress. Communalism is neither an ingrained nor essential part of the Congress programme, and its neo-liberal moves have been somewhat offset, at least rhetorically, by welfare commitments, some of which proved substantial enough to win it the 2004 elections. Nor does the Congress abjure liberal political forms or values.

In 2001, the budget speech of the union finance minister suggested drastic revisions in the existing labour laws. Thus far, retrenchment in factories that employ less than a hundred workers has been conditional on government approval. Now, factories employing fewer than a thousand workers – i.e. the overwhelming majority of all workplaces – can retrench at will. The formal sector, moreover, was to be considerably reduced, with an unrestricted outsourcing of products in all sectors of employment where workers once enjoyed a modicum of job security. Even

[34] For a review of economic policies, see Jayati Ghosh, "Perceptions of Difference: The Economic Underpinnings", in Panikkar, ed., *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, op. cit.

the BJP labour union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, opposed this vigorously.[35] The budget of 2002 was so much more spectacularly anti-poor, even anti-middle class, in terms of fiscal and pricing policies that the BJP had to acknowledge it had played a major role in the party's electoral reverses in several states and municipalities.

As the 2004 elections have just shown, the subaltern voter's response to the erosion of livelihood and survival issues still retains the capacity to throw a government out if responsible governance seems out of reach. And even though popular mass movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan were defeated by the state, there is no guarantee that all such efforts in the future are fated to remain so. The visibility of social movements the world over is evident, and the World Social Forum of Mumbai in January 2004 made its slogan "Another World Is Possible" – for a change, this seemed something better than mere rhetorical flourish.

Yet despite its electoral failure, the BJP and the Sangh will remain of critical importance to the global Right, and to corporates. Among Indian political groupings it alone provides a coherent and explicit critique of the principle of equality and of rights – in short, of democracy – without naming it as such. Moreover, it has provided a substitute for material welfare for classes and castes that its policies victimise: a degree of equality in communal violence and a shared vision of the Hindu nation. It is not clear yet if the party will establish itself as the moral compass for all or most Hindus, but its grassroots organisations – more multifarious and numerous, perhaps, than those of all other political parties taken together – aspire to achieve just that. They may be well on their way to attaining that capability, despite their recent electoral reverses.

[35] The *Hindu*, 4 March 2001.

# 7

# Historical Pedagogy and Historical Common Sense

## Hindutva's Public and Professional Histories

WHAT THE "SCIENCE" of race difference was to Nazi ideology, the discipline of History is to Hindutva: a claim to "formal knowledge" which exalts political mission as accredited Truth.[1] The RSS, mother lode of the entire Hindutva apparatus, has thirty-six affiliates under it. Of these, one is entirely devoted to the particular knowledge form of History.

But whereas Nazi power lasted twelve years, the Hindu Right has now been pursuing knowledge production and dissemination for close to a century.[2] Restricted till Independence to core

[1] Hindutva is – as evident from the preceding essays – distinct from the Hinduism that is the faith of Hindus. It is the self-designation of an organisational combine and the term was coined by V.D. Savarkar in 1923, when he claimed it referred to the cultural essence of Indian nationhood. V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is A Hindu?* Nagpur, 1923; reprinted Delhi, Bharatiya Sadan, 1989.

[2] As noted in the preceding essays, the RSS which calibrates the entire Hindutva combine was founded in 1925. Till Independence, it developed

organisations of the RSS, plans for installing an RSS version of the past at official and popular levels were put together in 1973.[3] RSS schools started to teach it even earlier, from the early 1950s, while daily *shakha*s propagated it from 1925.[4]

Its own particular representation of the past is both the medium and the message for Hindutva's ideological apparatus and political agenda. It is important, therefore, to grasp what Hindutva wants to project as history in general, and Indian history in particular. This involves an understanding of its rhetorical and pedagogical strategies, and its organisational networks, through which history lessons circulate at multiple social levels.

I begin with their foundational ideological texts, written by V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar. Then I track their refractions in school textbooks prepared by the RSS, whenever and wherever its electoral front the BJP has been in power.[5]

Some textbooks were prepared for the RSS' Vidya Bharati schools, and some were published in 2002 under the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) for central government schools when an earlier BJP government was in power.[6] For more advanced levels I look at a recent course of

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some direct affiliates among women and students. Later, it developed mass fronts to fight elections, organise religious institutions, and so on.

[3] Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana, *Visions and Perspectives*, 1973.

[4] On this, see Tanika Sarkar, "Educating the Children of Hindu Rashtra", above; Akshaya Bakaya, "India: RSS Schools in the Hindu Nationalist Education Project", *Scroll.in*, 21 April 2009; Rohini Mohan, "Indianise, Nationalise, Spiritualise", *Scroll.in*, 30 August 2016.

[5] For the BJP, see Amrita Basu, *Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

[6] *Ancient India* and *Contemporary India*, NCERT textbooks for class XI and class IX, respectively, Delhi, 2002.

lectures organised by the prestigious University of Delhi. Delivered to college teachers from different states, these orientation and refresher courses usually acquaint participants with new developments in their fields. In 2017, however, lecturers were hand-picked, largely from BJP and Sangh functionaries, and many were not academics.[7]

Finally, I will analyse the RSS journal of history and its research projects.[8]

It is important to remember that the RSS' historical lessons are not confined to educational institutions. A simpler version is preached by its religious front, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), by Hindu sectarian leaders, and even by the RSS trade union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS).[9] Priests at some of the Delhi temples told us that the most sacred event for them was Vijaya Dashami Day, 1925, when the Sangh was founded.[10] The sacred

[7] Orientation Courses 90 and 91, and Refresher Course on Indian Thought, Culture and Thinking (Bharatiya Bodh), organised by the CPDHE, Delhi University, Winter School, 2017, November–December 2017. Some teachers attending the lectures handed their notes to me. A report on the course was also published as "Hindutva Politics in Command at Delhi University: Complaint of Teacher (Dis)orientation", in the *Wire*, 19 February 2018.

[8] *Itihas Darpan*, published by the Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana, April and October 2013 and April 2016. On the restructuring of the Indian Council of Historical Research, see Ritika Chopra, *Indian Express*, 24 June 2017.

[9] Tanika Sarkar, "Hindutva's Hinduism", in J. Zavos, P. Kanungo, D. Reddy, M. Warrior, and E. Williams, eds, *Public Hinduisms*, Delhi: Sage, 2012.

[10] See Tapan Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, Delhi: Orient

and the human are strangely conflated, and historical time gets pride of place in the sacred calendar. Similarly, Sanatan Dharam temple functionaries in Delhi in 1991 discoursed not about divine or spiritual themes but only about past Hindu–Muslim conflicts to justify the ongoing Ramjanmabhoomi movement. The demolition of the sixteenth-century Babri mosque at Ayodhya in 1992, they claimed – without historical or archaeological basis, none being available – was necessitated by the need to rebuild the Rama temple which had once existed at that precise spot until demolished by the Mughal emperor Babur. That "history" of Mughal oppression led, as is well known, to massive anti-Muslim violence spearheaded by the BJP and VHP.[11]

## II

RSS history teachers are legion. The Sangh trains myriad mass fronts, affiliates, and sub-affiliates on a daily basis. They seep into the minute pores of Indian society, forming cells within religion, charity, culture, education, leisure; among women, students, Adivasis/tribals, Dalits/"untouchable" castes, urban and rural workers, army personnel, lawyers. This creeping hegemony is facilitated, though not really created, by electoral

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Longman, 1993, chapter 2. See also Manjari Katju's essay in C. Jaffrelot, ed., *The Sangh Parivar*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005; and Shubh Mathur, *The Everyday Life of Hindu Nationalism: An Ethnographic Account*, Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2008.

[11] On the "historical" arguments used in the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign, see Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhoomi", in S. Gopal, ed., *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1991. See also Sumit Sarkar for the larger historical agenda, "The Many Worlds of Indian History", in idem, *Writing Social History*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

victories. The RSS prioritises "man-making" as the first step in "nation-making".[12] All its affiliates convey an identical sense of the past.[13]

This history is prepared by and for a Hindu vernacular elite but is now becoming mandatory for would-be scholars as well. It is not the work of trained historians, and it would be dangerously easy to ridicule it as naïve and plainly wrong, devoid of the minimum academic standards. This version of "history" is propagated through multiple grassroots institutions that go far beyond the formal academic sphere. It is taught by thousands of cadres who have worked tirelessly for decades. Its strength and reach are therefore unparalleled.

## III

Their basic historical narrative is best told in the words of Savarkar, who made Hindu and Indian synonymous in order to reserve the Indian nation for Hindus alone. He rendered each as a seamless monolithic unit, despite undeniable caste inequalities casting doubt on any notion of an organic Hindu *volk*. Undeterred, Savarkar finds his solution to the difficulty in the motif of shared blood: despite caste endogamy among Hindus, he says, blood of all castes has mingled over centuries through miscegenation, making Hindus a single people. At one stroke, then, caste inequality is invoked and also left behind. Identity is, above all, an act of exclusion:

[12] "History According to the Puranas: RSS' Next Big Project", *Firstpost*, 18 January 2014.

[13] For the different wings under the Sangh, see the articles in C. Jaffrelot, ed., *The Sangh Parivar*, op. cit. Also Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts*, op. cit.

> [W]e Hindus are bound together not only by the tie of the love that we bear to a common fatherland and the common blood that courses through our veins, but also by the common homage we pay to . . . our Hindu culture . . . We are one because we are a nation, a race and own a common Sanskrit . . . in the case of our Mohammedan or Christian countrymen . . . though Hindustan to them is Fatherland . . . yet it is not their Holyland too. Their mythology and Godmen . . . are not the children of this soil . . . their names and their outlook smack of a foreign origin . . .

The ultimate tests of belonging are faith and language. They commingle because Sanskrit is the language of Hindu sacred texts. Its script being carried into modern Hindi, the latter has claims to being the national language.[14] "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan" was a slogan he coined.[15]

How did India become the land of Hindus? Savarkar glorifies "Aryan" – often invoked as "race" – conquests of indigenous people. Aryans founded

> new colonies . . . At last, the great mission . . . of founding a nation and a country . . . reached its geographical limit when the valorous Prince of Ayodhya [i.e. the Ramayana's hero Rama] made a triumphant entry into Ceylon and actually brought the whole land from the Himalayas to the Seas under one sovereign sway . . . that day was the real birth-day of our Hindu people . . .

Imperial wars and colonisation lie at the root of Hindu India, and acts of conquest are much valued.[16]

[14] Though the constitution designates it an official language, the BJP has asked the UN to make it India's national language. *Indian Express*, Delhi, 6 January 2017.

[15] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007, p. 15.

[16] See Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, op. cit.

Buddhism, he believes, emasculated the Hindus. Savarkar denounces Ambedkar, who converted to Buddhism, as "a man burning with hatred against Hinduism", and "Pushyamitra [was] forced . . . to hang the Buddhists who were guilty of seditious acts and to pull down the monasteries which had become centres of sedition. It was a just punishment for high treason . . ."[17] For later Savarkarites, Buddhism held yet another danger: that of peace. Peace destroys martial valour and exposes the nation to foreign attacks – so said VHP supremo B.L. Sharma Prem in 1991 – and he showed a similar revulsion against medieval devotional sects, even though several belonged to the Hindu fold.[18] Their otherworldly mysticism, he argued, enervated the hyper-masculine Hindus. A South Indian BJP minister, Ananthakumar Hegde, once tweeted: "If not for Buddhism, we would have had an Akhand Bharat."[19]

Savarkar treats some invasions lightly. " For the Greek, Saka, Huna and other invaders . . . their raids had never been occasioned by any cultural or religious hatred."[20] But when Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India, "that day, the conflict of life and death began."[21]

Muslims have many sins. First, abominable strength: "Nations and civilisations fell before the sword of Islam."[22] Curiously, strength becomes a sign of Muslim viciousness, whereas Aryan conquests are described as civilisational triumph.

[17] V.D. Savarkar, *The Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, Delhi: Rajdhani Granthagar, 1971, pp. 85, 131.

[18] Interview granted to T. Basu, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, P.K. Datta, and Sambudha Sen, February 1991.

[19] Tweet of 11 April 2017, *Altnews*, 4 September 2017.

[20] Savarkar, *The Six Glorious Epochs*, op. cit., pp. 129–30.

[21] Savarkar, *Hindutva*, op. cit.

[22] Ibid.

Second, "these new Islamic enemies not only aspired to crush the Hindu political power . . . but they also had . . . a fierce religious ambition . . . Intoxicated by this . . . many times more diabolic than their political one, these millions of Muslim invaders from all over Asia fell over India, century after century with all the ferocity at their command to destroy the Hindu religion which was the lifeblood of the nation . . ."[23]

There is absolutely no evidence that medieval Muslims were religious fanatics without territorial ambitions, and there is every evidence that these dynasties became fully Indianised quite soon. Histories of Muslim royal patronage to Hindu religious establishments are eschewed whereas occasional depredations of religious places are highlighted in garish colours. "Muslim demons were demolishing Hindu temples and breaking to pieces their holiest of idols . . ."[24]

A complex history of multifaceted intercommunity exchanges and intimacies, as well as royal conflicts,[25] cedes place to perpetual war: that being the leitmotif of RSS history. Indian Muslims – artisans, peasants, beggars, men, women, Muslims under Muslim rule as well as Muslims in Hindu-ruled areas – are all dissolved into the figure of the invader.[26] There is, moreover, total identity between nation/community/people (as synonymous, interchangeable terms ) and rulers.[27]

The Muslim becomes an open, floating signifier on which any

[23] Savarkar, *The Six Glorious Epochs*, op. cit., pp. 129–30.

[24] Ibid., p. 130.

[25] On the actual imperial practices of Muslim rulers *vis-à-vis* Hindus, see Raziuddin Aquil's excellent and balanced historical account *In the Name of Allah: Understanding Islam and Indian History*, Delhi: Viking, 2009.

[26] Sarkar, "The Many Worlds of Indian History", op. cit.

[27] Ibid.

kind of Hindu communalised history can be freely inscribed. At the same time, he is also a closed category, representing fanaticism and oppression. The paradoxical logic makes the living Muslim stand in for the historical, the pseudo-historical, and the mythological: sometimes as Babur who initiated Mughal rule (in the 1990s, all Muslims were referred to as *Babur ki aulad* or Babur's children); sometimes as an earlier sultan, Alauddin Khalji, who apparently ravished a Rajput queen not even existent in the same century as him – if she existed at all;[28] and sometimes for a mythological demon whom Rama, divine incarnation and epic warrior-king, killed because he had abducted Rama's wife.[29] A glorious medley of referents, a universe of myth and magical realism calling itself history.

The worst and the most persistent sin of this generic Muslim is rape:

> It was a religious duty of every Muslim to kidnap and force into their own religion non Muslim women. This incited their sensuality and lust for carnage and while it increased their number, it affected the Hindu population in an inverse proportion . . . Muslims . . . considered it their highly religious duty to carry away forcibly the women of the enemy side as if they were commonplace property, to ravish them, to pollute them, and to distribute them to all and sundry . . . and to absorb them completely in their fold . . . which increased their number . . .[30]

[28] On the violence under the Hindu Right-wing Karni Sena on the representation of the legend in a film, *Padmavati*, see *Indian Express*, 17 and 21 November 2017; for an account of the history of this queen, see Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India, c. 1550–1900*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.

[29] Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts*, chapter 2.

[30] Ibid., p. 172.

Rape tales circulate decade after decade, with fresh embellishments drawn from various historical contexts in which epic, medieval, and Partition times mingle effortlessly with recent allegations of Muslim conspiracies to abduct Hindu women. A timeless popular historical memory is born, justifying Hindu communal violence in the present.[31] It is this function that explains the centrality of history in Sangh politics, which provides an elastic pool of past villains, presumably because vulnerable and cornered present-day Muslims do not provide sufficient evidence of offences that merit contemporary levels of bloodthirstiness. Political needs, beliefs, and memory assert privilege over investigative history. The claim is that "your history" comes in the way of "my memory".

Savarkar blamed the iconic Hindu warrior-king Shivaji for not abducting Muslim queens. "The souls of those millions of aggrieved women might perhaps have said, 'Do not forget, O Your Majesty . . . the unutterable atrocities and oppression and outrage committed on us . . . It was the suicidal Hindu idea of chivalry to women which saved the Muslim women . . ."[32]

Partition was accompanied with monstrous violence against women in which Hindus and Muslims were equally complicit. But Hindutva chooses to excise Hindu rapists from public memory. Savarkar outlined the notion of "just and necessary

[31] Against Junaid Khan and against Arfazul Mohammad, in June and December 2017, respectively, for instance. Both were killed brutally only because they were Muslims. Arfazul was killed in revenge for so-called "love jihad", i.e. the abduction of Hindu women by Muslim men, though he was not personally involved in any cross-community romance. His murder was filmed and triumphantly circulated on social media. See www.youtube.com/watch, NDTV, 6 December 2017.

[32] Ibid., p. 461.

rapes". To quote his biographer, "He said that Pakistan's inhuman and barbarous acts such as kidnapping and raping Indian women would not be stopped unless Pakistan was given tit for tat."[33] So, "Day after day, decade after decade, century after century, the ghastly conflict [between Hindus and Muslims] continued, and India single-handedly kept up the fight morally and militarily." For Hindutva, the past is but present continuous, in the sense that Muslims now represent the invaders of medieval times. Revenge becomes the pre-eminent lesson of history, to be realised through ceaseless wars. The motif of war is all-pervasive. Even classrooms – as a lecturer at the Delhi orientation course emphasised – must teach us how and why to go to war. For so did Krishna, "the ideal teacher" and incarnation of God, in the sacred epic Mahabharata, teaching a reluctant prince about the necessity of war, blurring classrooms into battlefields.[34]

Having constructed an awesome enemy figure, Hindutva then commands Hindus to refashion themselves in the image of the enemy – infinitely fanatical, cruel, lustful – so as to best the imagined Muslim at his own game. Here the first step is therefore to create a serviceable image of the Other, and then to recast the Self in that mould. Inaugural offence is always ascribed to the enemy, and everlasting benediction bestowed upon all subsequent Hindutva aggression.

The RSS never joined anti-colonial movements nor ever faced British repression. Savarkar, however, had been a revolutionary extremist before he turned to Hindutva. He wrote an account of the 1857 anti-British uprising, representing it as the

[33] Dhananjay Keer, *Veer Savarkar*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966, p. 539.

[34] Lecture on 25 November 2017 by Aseervathan Achary, retired Railways Department official and now BJP *karyakarta* (office holder), lecturing to college teachers at Delhi University.

heroism of kings rather than as subaltern resistance. He exulted in its bloodshed – the supposed beheading of British mothers by sepoys in front of their infants, and vice versa.[35] The killing of innocents becomes patriotism and History functions as a spur to and celebration of inhuman cruelty.

Savarkar was exiled to the Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands in 1911, where he changed his tune, pleading with the British to let him go so that he could serve their "Aryan Empire" stretching between Ireland and India. The British obliged and Savarkar remained unflinchingly loyal to Empire all through the subsequent massive anti-colonial popular movements. Why the change of heart? He was alarmed, he says, by Hindu–Muslim unity that the contemporary Non-Cooperation–Khilafat upsurge had unleashed. Unless the "Yavana (Muslim) snakes" could be tackled, India and Empire faced a common crisis.[36]

If Savarkar genuflected before colonialism and if present-day Hindutva courts Western leaders and commodities avidly, the West poses, nonetheless, a political-cultural problem for his successors today as the purveyor of dangerous ideas about social justice, constitutionalism, socialism, and secularism – and above all as the progenitor of Christian missionaries who convert Hindus and educate Dalits and tribals.

However, just as Hindu–Muslim anti-colonial unity became a real possibility in the early 1920s, the representation of Hindus as a single organic substance began to crumble. This was a peak period for "low-caste" movements and organisations, especially

[35] Cited from Savarkar's *First War of Independence*, by Jyotirmoy Sharma in *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin, 2003, pp. 146–8.

[36] C. Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, op. cit., pp. 91–2. See also Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts*, chapter 1.

in western and southern India.[37] That made the highlighting of a hostile Other even more essential for managing Hindu unity.

Savarkar was admirably candid:

> Nothing makes the self conscious of itself so much as a conflict with non-self. Nothing can weld people into a nation and nations into a state as the pressure of a common foe. Hatred separates as well as unites. Never had Sindhusthan [Hindustan] a better chance and a more powerful stimulus to be herself forged into an indivisible whole as on that dire day when the great iconoclast [Mahmud of Ghazni] crossed the Indus . . .[38]

It is the external foe who creates the nation, the anti-national always pre-dates the national. The nation, moreover, is not a modern political construct. It is primordial, everlasting, and unchanging: the actualisation of a singular cultural essence, defined by what it is not.

Savarkar's perspective has proved to be remarkably tenacious, composed though it was nearly a century back. He also laid the groundwork for Hindutva's typical arsenal of rhetoric and arguments. His multi-volume history is free of verified source material. It is a string of assertions which double up as proof positive, simply because he said them – and said them with such rhetorical force. His is a battle against modern historical methods even as he overturns the substance of authenticated academic histories.

Savarkar inherited his building blocks from several nineteenth-century ideological writings.[39] He seems to have strung together

[37] See Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, eds, *Caste in Modern India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014.

[38] *Hindutva*, cited in Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, op. cit., p. 92.

[39] Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*, London: Berg, 2001.

stray fragments into what he thought was a coherent whole. M.S. Golwalkar, the second supreme leader of the RSS, added another contemporary inspirational model. In 1938 he wrote:

> To keep up the purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the semitic races . . . Race pride at its highest has been manifested here . . . all the constituents of the Nation idea have been boldly vindicated in modern Germany and that, too, in the actual present, when we can for ourselves see and study them . . . a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by . . . they [non-Hindus] may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges . . . not even citizen's rights.

The Sangh Parivar has neither retracted nor denounced this profusely reprinted and much-used statement.[40] Nazi-worship persists. In 1998, when the ABVP was celebrating its fiftieth birthday, I was astonished to see their Hyderabad camp calling itself "Blitzkrieg". In 2004, the Social Studies textbook for Class X in Modi-ruled Gujarat state said: "Hitler lent dignity and prestige to the German people." It had nothing negative or critical about Nazism.[41] The admiration does have wider and older sources, Nazi enmity against imperial Britain being one. But the real affinity with Hindutva has different roots. Savarkar prescribed fierce violence against vulnerable "enemies" – women, children, minorities – and of such violence Hitler was the consummate exemplar.

More recently, the RSS supremo Mohan Bhagwat has promised to delete the statement from Golwalkar's Collected Works.

[40] M.S. Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan, 1938, chapter 3.

[41] Srenik Rao, "Hitler's Hindus: The Rise and the Rise of India's Nazi-Loving Hindus", *Haaretz: Israel News*, 14 December 2017.

He says that though it was relevant for its times, it is no longer so. This has been seen by many as a sign of a softened Hindutva. What is missed out is the assumption that it was all right to say such things at a time when already the Nazi Citizenship Bill had been passed and *Mein Kampf* published, leaving no one in any doubt about the fate of German Jews.

## IV

A lot of this history is taught through extra-curricular activities. When Rajasthan was BJP-ruled it compulsorily sent students from Jaipur government and private schools to "spiritual" camps to learn about Muslim violence and "love jihads".[42]

The first RSS primary school, Saraswati Shishu Mandir, came up in 1952: middle- and secondary-level schools were gradually added. The RSS now runs the largest school chain after the chain run by the central and state governments, teaching a total of 3.2 million (3,206,212 by one count) students across the country, some of these students being taught in the most inhospitable of places.[43] West Bengal, for instance, which the BJP has never ruled so far, had twenty-one RSS schools in 1990, when the Left Front government looked invincible.[44] At Naxalbari in North Bengal, where tea gardens have been long shut and where there are no affordable schools for the poor, a primary school was set up in 1999, taught by *pracharaks* earning Rs 500 a month, and by part time *vistaraks* earning Rs 250. Now grown into a formidable secondary-level school, it sends out its students among

[42] *Indian Express*, 12 December 2017.

[43] Mohan, "Indianise, Nationalise, Spiritualise", op. cit.

[44] Nandagopal Bhattacharya, *Moulabader Khama Nei*, Calcutta: Nabapatra Prakashan, 1994, p. 45.

unemployed workers to distribute charity as well as spread "moral education" about Hindutva.[45]

The nature of education is stratified. While mainstream schools are meant for the urban middle classes, there is abbreviated schooling for remote areas where Ekal Vidyalayas meet once a week with one teacher and offer a basic education. Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams provide rudimentary learning to tribal children, and so do Seva Bharati schools in slums.[46] Hundreds of Samskar Kendras disseminate "moral education" in remote, inaccessible areas. Their minimal educational content is offset by the sheer absence of other educational channels for these children. In BJP-ruled states, Vidya Bharati decides the curriculum for government schools.[47] All implant an aggressive Hindu supremacism and hatred for the non-Hindu. All exalt Hindu heroes who fought against Muslims.[48]

Vidya Bharati schools for middle-class students use NCERT textbooks in order to academically compete with government schools. When I visited them, the first NDA BJP-led government was not yet in power and they were forced to teach from nationalist-secular textbooks. To allay their effects, a whole host of supplementary aids had been instituted to align students to the Hindutva historical message. Visual icons, for

[45] "Dateline Naxalbari", *Indian Express*, 21 May 2017.

[46] For Seva Bharati schools, see C. Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism and the Social Welfare Strategy: Seva Bharati as an Educational Agency", in idem, ed., *Sangh Parivar: A Reader*, op. cit.; for slum schools, see Mohan, "Indianise, Nationalise, Spiritualise", op. cit.; and Sarkar, "Educating the Children", op. cit.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Vidya Bharati, Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sammelan, "Alternative Models of National Education", December 1990–March 1991.

instance, exist all over school premises. These show Hindu kings such as Shivaji and Rana Pratap who fought against Muslims. The Indian map, prominently displayed, is one of undivided India – or in RSS terminology Akhand Bharat – which includes Nepal, Afghanistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka, as well as Pakistan and Bangladesh. Headmasters may lecture on Muslim oppression during school assemblies. RSS history teaching is thus both non-stop and an audio-visual spectacle not confined to classroom, syllabus, or fixed school hours. It pervades all time and all space within their schools.

Most important are the compulsory Bharatiya Sanskriti courses which are a combination of Hindu ethnic pride and ethnic hatred.[49] There are "Know-your-Culture" booklets (*sanskriti-jnana*) to cover classes IV to XII, to prepare students and teachers for annual in-house national examinations. Examinees memorise a single correct answer to each question. Instead of historical processes, then, we have a catalogue of names and the quiz substitutes for analysis. "Who set up the five sacred *matha*s of Hinduism across India? – Adiguru Shankaracharya. Which tyrant got Guru Gobind Singh's two sons buried alive for refusing to give up Hinduism? – Aurangzeb."[50] No explanation is provided of who the people referred to were, their historical contexts, and their lives within their times.

In 2002, the BJP-led central government replaced the existing NCERT textbooks with its own. Glaring factual mistakes in these replacements were immediately detected but are far too numerous to dwell on. I will discuss their historical logic instead.

[49] Sarkar, "Educating the Children", op. cit.

[50] Mohan, "Indianise, Nationalise, Spiritualise", op. cit.

The class XI textbook on ancient India presents "the overall personality of the society and the people", implying both had a singular "personality". History helps us appreciate our "nation", and thus history becomes a biography, or collection of biographies, or more correctly a collective hagiography, of the nation.[51] Patriotism, defined as self-pride, is the express purpose of learning history. There is no doubt whatsoever that learning history means exclusively learning about Hindu patriotism. The book is a panegyric to the Hindu sages, including Manu, who prescribed harsh caste and gender discipline and who is arguably the most reviled target of attack by feminists and Dalits in contemporary India. It would seem from this text that the Hindu sages were more humane and scientific than savants elsewhere across the world. The text refers to Western scholars – Voltaire, Schelling, Kant, and numerous others – whose acknowledgement of Hindu greatness is crucial.[52] The West is selectively handled. Western thought is denigrated, but Western approbation of Hindu civilisation is continually referenced. When not found, their admiration is invented. Whenever Western sources are critical of Hindu practices or customs, they are excoriated: as is Marx, a "shallow thinker", a pro-British racist.[53] Antiquity carries supreme value, and India must always stand out as the first and the best of civilisations. The border between myths and historical sources vanishes as Puranic chronology is presented as precise historical sources and mythological figures become historical personages.[54]

[51] *Ancient India*, NCERT textbook for class XII, Delhi: NCERT, 2002, pp. 1–2.

[52] Ibid., p. 3.

[53] Ibid., p. 14.

[54] Ibid., p. 20.

The pedagogical methods are interesting: "In AD 1600, the English East India Company was established in India," says the textbook on *Contemporary History*, without explaining what the Company was in the first place.[55] The French Revolution gets cursory mention: it "destroyed the monarchy but ended in the dictatorship of Napoleon" and it used slogans like Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.[56] The narrative organisation in the texts is puzzling. After briefly mentioning Europeans as conquering the world – without any whys and hows – we are abruptly told that "Steamer [*sic*] was introduced in India in 1835." No connection is made with the preceding material, nor is the "steamer" or its significance explained.[57] Disjointed and abrupt sentences mark the writings, with no term being clarified. The tone of the sentences is hectoring, they announce their "facts" as axioms: "Trade led to political power and political power was used to propagate Christianity."[58]

"Popular Revolts" against British rule describes royal, not popular or subaltern, resistance. No Adivasi–peasant–worker struggles against oppression, Indian or British, are mentioned. The students are presumably not meant to connect past heroism and anti-colonial activism with present-day subalterns. Economic developments are discussed sketchily and confusingly. Surprisingly, the 1857 revolt is connected with "the famous theory of evolution by an English thinker Charles Darwin . . . through a long process of natural selection [not explained] man had descended not from Adam but from Ape. The theory also propounded the idea of continuous struggle for existence leading to

[55] *Contemporary History*, for class XI, Delhi: NCERT, 2002, p. 4.

[56] Ibid., p. 7.

[57] Ibid., p. 5.

[58] Ibid., p. 6.

the survival of the fittest."[59] Since students are told nothing about Darwin's theory of evolution, it is difficult to know what they are to make of this connection between Darwin and the 1857 struggles.[60] Understanding, clearly, is jettisoned in favour of rote learning, and intellectual interest or curiosity find no purchase.

The facts thrown at students are chosen selectively, leaving the account of modern times highly fractured. Moderate nationalists are dismissed as pro-British without a word about the economic critique of British rule. Gandhian satyagrahas are mentioned without clarifying the satyagraha concept. Revolutionary terrorists are by contrast glorious martyrs, being votaries of violence. But Bhagat Singh's socialist perspective, and his later turn to atheism, are elided. The demand for Dalit separate electorates becomes a sinister British divisive plot and Ambedkar enters only as the author of the Constitution, not for his critique of caste nor for his unambiguous condemnation of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism. There is nothing at all on liberal social reformers: nothing on women rebels such as Pandita Ramabai or "low-caste" protests. Critiques of caste and gender are embarrassing pointers to power lines among Hindus, so they are best forgotten.

RSS History is, in brief, stripped of processual content, analytical imperatives, thick description, and even of causal links.

[59] Ibid.

[60] The implication of the lesson connecting Darwin with the 1857 rebellion seems to be that the rebellion somehow helped shape Darwin's revolutionary ideas. In fact, the only connection between the Darwinian revolutionary idea and the 1857 rebellion lies in the fact that, ironically, the rebellion *delayed* information on the natural world being supplied to Darwin by Edward Blyth, his colonial informant in Calcutta: see Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, pp. 292–3.

## V

Despite their elementary grammatical and factual mistakes, these textbooks are still superior to what was taught as History to college teachers. They – intellectuals themselves, forming the thinking habits of young students – were repeatedly told that too much thinking is pernicious, and that one should instead follow prescribed action. RSS *margdarshak* Lajja Ram Tomar's notions of history provided the content. I will cite a few gems from him at random.

> Europe and the US are filled with the ruins of ancient Hindu empires. Molten gold flowed in rivers for six months after the British sacked Bhonsle's Nagpur palace. The Rg Veda calculated the speed of light. A sleepless Mussolini was lulled to sleep by Indian classical music. Paris set up Manu's statue with the caption [in English!]: "First Lawgiver of the World". The Upanishads described earth's rotation on axis as causing day and night. Sanskrit is the perfect computer-science language. Only the sacred pipal tree and tulsi plant produce oxygen.[61]

These propositions or variants on them are reproduced in most history lectures as Hindutva's account of India's cultural past becomes the ground for every subject that college teachers teach. A lecture on Chemistry was at least not outrageous even if consisting entirely of the health properties of sacred plants and the excellence of ancient scientific treatises. The point being made was, however, in line with the RSS' need to demonstrate the superiority of ancient Indian science.[62] Meanwhile, NASA scientists heard the sun uttering the Hindu holy sound "Aum';

[61] Cited in Bakaya, "India: RSS Schools", op. cit.

[62] Orientation course lecture by Ranjana Agarwal, chemistry teacher from Kurukshetra University, 24 November 2017.

ancient Hindu medical treatises taught advanced plastic surgery; Chinese civilisation learnt everything from ancient Hindus though they now deny the debt; ancient Hindus reached the highest peaks of modern mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, physics; India was the first country to make oil and cotton.[63] Western authorities are invariably cited or mis-cited for all Hindu civilisational claims.[64]

Yet at bottom Western ideas are evil. They teach excessive individual freedom. A Supreme Court advocate said that the freedom to oppose one's employer is a dangerous privilege and that Gandhi always spoke of duties rather than rights. Equality before the law is not an absolute right: there should be a reasonable classification of individuals as some are more equal than others.[65] Another Supreme Court advocate argued that democracy is an irrelevant Western concept whereas Hindu monarchy provided an absolutely just form of governance. *Varnashrama* provided social equality and Hindu texts and social practices bestowed perfect gender equality.

The party slant is obvious and ubiquitous. A BJP functionary said that ancient *gurukulas* provided education to all, but that in medieval times Muslims blocked women's education. Prime Minister Modi is now reviving this lost tradition of female education and empowerment.[66] Leftists are definitionally anti-national, being inspired by Marx's contempt for Hanuman worship. Kapil

[63] The propositions of Dr Nirmal Jain, Lecturer, Satyavati College, 25 November 2017.

[64] Sudarshan Ramabhadran, Deputy Director, India Foundation, mentions a list of such scholars, including "Harvard-educated" Diana Eck, 5 December 2017.

[65] This being the view of Anurag Jha, 24 November 2017.

[66] Asservathan Achary, 25 November 2017; also Anirban Ganguly, 27 November 2017.

Kumar, a professor of history at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, and Monica Aurora, a Supreme Court advocate, provided a diatribe against Marx as well as Indian leftist students and professors such as Nivedita Menon, a professor of politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, who they believe wants to divide the country.[67]

How did caste originate? Professor Kapil Kumar explained that Turks introduced commodes into India. Hindus who refused to convert to Islam were forced to clean them and they thus became untouchables. He also traced back the origins of the *karva chauth* ritual – whereby Hindu wives worship their husbands – to Muslim attacks on Hindu kingdoms. These attacks forced all Hindu men, facing certain death, to be at war all the time; their wives ensured their safe return with this ritual.

Kapil Kumar twists the arguments of anti-RSS historians to support his view. He cites Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on Jadunath Sarkar to claim that, since Chakrabarty thinks Sarkar was a great scholar, the latter's condemnation of Muslims carries the absolute truth. Anyone who reads Chakrabarty's book without bias will see the author making it quite clear that, first, Jadunath Sarkar was no crude Muslim-hater, and second that he himself does not share Jadunath Sarkar's politics.[68] Kumar also flagrantly misquotes Sumit Sarkar to make Gandhi appear as the leader responsible for Partition.[69] Such illicit appropriations of Others emerge from a deep cultural envy of cosmopolitan

[67] Kapil Kumar, Monica Aurora, 28 November 2017. Professor Menon faces several legal suits for her critique of the government's policies towards the North East and Kashmir.

[68] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and his Empire of Truth*, Chicago and Ranikhet: University of Chicago Press and Permanent Black, 2015.

[69] Kapil Kumar, 28 November 2017.

international scholarship. A couple of known names of opponents are cited to suggest their shared perspective with and international credibility within a wider scholarly world.

## VI

The RSS has ambitious plans for advanced historical research, having packed the Indian Council of Historical Research with its own functionaries. Their agenda is "Indianising" and "nationalising" research, and – more significantly – taking it to the common man. They plan to establish the historical authenticity of Puranic sources and date them precisely.[70] The latter exercise, having already been undertaken by scholars opposed to myth-making, the new purpose is to claim for them a greater antiquity.

This research agenda was envisioned in 1973 by Morepant Pingley, an RSS full-timer, and developed by Balmukund Pandey, the present organising secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana (ABISY). The purpose, according to its "Visions and Perspectives" document, is to correct distortions introduced under the British Raj which "perverted the traditional heroes, culture, literature and languages". The West also transformed the minds of historians who forgot to admire the Self, and denied that Hinduism is the bedrock of Indian culture.[71]

Indianisation involves rejecting a global dating system and adopting *kaliyugabda*, a laborious mythological chronology never used by historians. In *Itihas Darpan* time is calculated in accord with Kali Yuga,[72] the last and darkest of ages in the

[70] Ritika Chopra, *Indian Express*, 21 January 2017.

[71] "History According to the Puranas", op. cit.

[72] *Itihas Darpan*, Delhi, October 2013. *Itihas Darpan* is a bi-annual, bilingual journal.

four-age temporal cycle used in myths. "In reality, Kali Yuga is an artificial creation of astronomers, fabricated at a much later date to provide a convenient chronology base for astronomical and calendrical calculations . . . Its inauguration is taken to coincide with 18 February 3102 BC . . . Since Kali Yuga years are normally counted as expired, they can be converted to AD years by subtracting 3101 or 3100, depending on the month."[73]

Soon after Modi's victory, ABISY announced in August 2014 that it had completed four research projects: (a) tracing the route of the Saraswati River and thereby establishing the historicity of the Vedas in which the river – now lost and believed dead – is mentioned; (b) countering the old theory that Aryans migrated to India and claiming that they originated among Adivasis or *janjatiṣ*; (c) dating the Mahabharata, Shankaracharya, and the Buddha; (d) finalising research on the uprising of 1857 which Savarkar called the First War of Independence. Over the next ten years, it would compile a Puranic encyclopaedia, reinterpret their original meaning, and establish them as "India's real history".

A lot of effort is attached to overwriting an old Hindutva historiography that subscribed to the idea of a foreign Indo-Aryan origin for caste Hindus – who it had been argued then colonised and civilised India. The new revisionism strenuously asserts, instead, that a common origin unites Savarna/Aryans and tribal/Adivasis, they actually belong to the same stock. Only later did a more advanced part of this common stock separate itself and migrate outwards to civilise the rest of the world. The remaining Adivasis, quite clearly, were left behind because they had failed to advance. This, though not said openly, clearly explains why

[73] Richard Solomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Other Indo-European Languages*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998, pp. 180–1.

some became marginalised, dispossessed, often pauperised. In a brilliant move, then, affinity is proclaimed, only to cover over and perpetuate age-old discriminatory and oppressive practices. Instead of structural transformation in Adivasi conditions, real immiserisation is compensated for by imagined and symbolic incorporation into the Aryan fold. Such incorporation is politically crucial, given the success of Christian missionary education and social mobility projects, conversions in the North East, and secessionist politics among these deprived populations.[74] Interestingly, the new origin story cancels the older historical narrative of Aryan conquests which Savarkar had described. That is now an embarrassing reminder of the "foreignness" of caste/Savarna Hindus.

How exactly is the incorporation attempted? We circle back to another aspect of their historical project: the significant process of writing and disseminating the new histories. These constitute a historiographical movement which starts at the grassroots and moves upwards into research publications. ABISY collects oral myths in Kulu, Himachal Pradesh, from Adivasis, then locates analogues in Brahmanical myths and claims mutual affinity and common origin.[75] It draws local subalterns and elites into the process of writing new histories.

Daniela Berti found in 1996 that Kulu tribal deities are believed to speak directly to institutionalised mediums about their lives. ABISY appropriates these "secret and inspired stories" to fold local legends into Hindu "histories" and cultural traditions. Initially, gods told their lives to a low-caste/tribal, illiterate but

[74] *Indian Express*, 18 August 2014; *Hindustan Times*, Delhi, 21 August 2014.

[75] Daniela Berti, "The Memory of Gods: From a Secret Autobiography to a Nationalist Project", *Indian Folklife*, no. 24, October 2006.

divinely inspired medium who then recited those words to the king, but without comprehension. Devender Singh, ex-king and staunch RSS supporter, now transcribes them and hands them over to ABISY to interpret their meaning. A local tribal legend about eighteen snakes, for instance, has been arbitrarily pulled into the Brahmanical Ganesha myth: its authenticity is apparently borne out by "geological" research. Western science, as always, provides imagined accreditation.

Little attention has been paid so far to RSS work on local histories, national textbook controversies having obscured them altogether.[76] Local lore is more permeable to RSS history writing since it does not require an evidential scaffolding and can rely on divine inspiration. ABISY works on a heroic scale. The RSS pracharak Ram Singh Thakur gave up a pre-Partition faculty position at Lahore University to dedicate himself to this activity full time. He lives in a single room at the Keshuv Kunj RSS hostel and travels untiringly, despite his old age, to supervise *Itihas Darpan* publications. He ensures that they inculcate "national consciousness of India's glorious past" and "denunciation of the damage caused by Muslim and Christian invaders".[77] The president of Kulu's ABISY is a lawyer who organises seminars to prove that tribes are a part of Hindu culture. He draws in "local intellectuals" – schoolteachers and priests – as historians who interpret "*bharta*", i.e. the lives of local gods, and annexes them to the Brahmanical cosmogony. Since the entire mountainous region is supposedly the abode of sages, contemporary ascetics are also drawn into the project in the role of historians. Berti cites

[76] Daniela Berti, "Hindu Nationalists and Local History: From Ideology to Local Lore", *Rivista Di Studi Sudasiatici*, 11, 2007, Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2007, pp. 3–78.

[77] Ibid., pp. 6–9.

a letter by Devender Singh, who wrote to many villages to join this "good work", merge local tribal mediums with Hindu sages, and "local discourse mostly from local elites" (royals and priests) with Sanskrit texts and gods. He opposes "Communist" histories of subaltern lives and resistance.[78] Ex-royals, however oppressive their past record, still enjoy considerable local veneration. Singh's presence in the project therefore carries much weight.

We see the same endeavour in Nagaland, which is heavily Christianised.[79] Traditional Nagas worshipped gods associated with rocks, hills, and rivers. Nineteenth-century Christian missionaries and earlier Vaishnav proselytisers made considerable inroads into these belief systems. Now a wholesale Hinduisation is being carried out under anti-Christian and anti-insurrectionary auspices, fuelled initially by the Niyogi Commission findings of 1959 on supposed links between the two. RSS outfits worked closely from the 1960s with the Ramakrishna Mission – the prestigious religious institution famed for its educational projects – absorbing local cults and deities into a Hindu pantheon.[80] They organise local Hindu festivals and conferences with constructive employment-generating programmes for women and children. And that brings us to a crucial aspect of Hindutva's pedagogic package. Among deeply marginalised groups and places, history teaching is handed out along with charity. The stitching of minimal welfare with Hindutva education vastly expands the scope for the RSS historical vision. In Arunachal

[78] Ibid., pp. 19–26.

[79] John Thomas, "From Sacred Rocks to Temple: Recasting Religion as Identity in North Eastern India", unpublished article.

[80] Arkotong Longkumar, *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement in North East India*, London: Continuum International, 2010, pp. 134–9.

Pradesh, affordable Shakti Peeths (RSS schools) expanded hand in hand with attacks against churches from 1977, under the RSS-affiliated Vivekananda Kendra (VK). By 2010, Arunachal had thirty RSS schools with 400 teachers and more than 10,000 students. All followed the residential gurukula model with non-stop monitoring of students and classes on the Gita, yoga, and "topical issues".

In 1993 it established the Vivekananda Institute of Culture at Guwahati, to make it "the regional" intellectual fountainhead". This institute developed a strong academic profile, frequently offering seminars, lectures, and research projects – especially into histories of local communities to involve them in exploring their own traditions while simultaneously absorbing them within Hindutva. There is great emphasis on denouncing "alien" influences. Local beliefs are injected with Brahmanical analogues to traditional sun and moon worship.[81]

Inclusionary strategies are allied to exclusionary ones. If marginalised tribals are gathered into the folds of Brahmanical belief, conflict with non-Hindus is simultaneously produced to strengthen subaltern incorporation through offering a sense of shared violence.

Golwalkar had a brief "spiritual" affiliation with the Ramakrishna Math in the 1930s. Later, in 1963, he founded the Vivekananda Rock Memorial at Kanyakumari, at the confluence of the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean, to dedicate the RSS ideal of Hindu nationalism to Vivekananda. This was blessed by the Ramakrishna Mission, the authorised

[81] P. Kanungo, "Fusing the Ideals of the Math with the Ideology of the Sangh? Vivekananda Kendra, Ecumenical Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism", in J. Zavos, P. Kanungo, D. Reddy, M. Warrior, and R.B. Williams, eds, *Public Hinduisms*, Delhi: Sage, India, 2012, pp. 134–7.

custodians of Vivekananda's memory. But opposition came from local Christians who claimed the rock for St Xavier. The Madras government eventually upheld the Hindutva claim. The disputed site unleashed massive mobilisation of Hindu religious institutions at a national level. Even high-level Congressmen supported the RSS project.

The VK was launched in 1972 to combine Vivekananda's ideal of philanthropy and service with Hindu nation building. Its cadres generally consist of the unmarried, women forming 50 per cent of them in 2010. In 2010, the VK ran 944 service projects across the country: informal schooling for pre-school children, health centres, yoga training, hostels, vocational training for women, water management, rural housing, and agricultural renewable energy methods. The V.K. Medical Research Foundation in Assam offers online medical help.[82]

A Hindutva sense of the cultural past, with its lethal mix of ethnic pride and ethnic hatred, pervades all such projects. But it is so deftly woven into a strong fabric of much-needed charity that it proves irresistible.

## VII

*Itihas Darpan* is Hindutva's strongest academic face.[83] A bi-annual and bilingual journal, it has intermittently appeared from 1995. The ICHR has been sponsoring it since 2016.[84] The RSS office at Keshuv Kunj, Delhi, is the headquarters, giving it a metro cast. It has thirteen regional branches, linked to multiple universities.

[82] Ibid., pp. 126–33.

[83] I could only locate three issues with the help of Akash Bhattacharya: October 2013, and April and October 2016.

[84] The April 2016 issue puts that in a big black box on the front cover.

By 2014, five hundred university professors were helping it. In July, ABISY head Y.S. Rao was appointed ICHR chairperson and regional ABISY functionaries filled up its posts, leaving no gap between national, governmental, and RSS.

Savarna, Sanskrit, and Brahmanical texts dominate the production: T.P. Verma and Gunjam Aggarwal – neither of them known as historians – being editor and sub-editor. The front page proves the Hinduness and Hindutvaness of its "Indianised" history: a Ganesha logo on the top, photos of RSS founder Hedgewar and of second supremo Golwalkar at the bottom, and the Om symbol affixed to most essays.[85] The first article is a homage to Golwalkar who represents "*Gyanajyoti*" (the radiance of knowledge) and who recovered Hindu splendour and unity: "*Vaibhav Prasad, ekatmabodhak tattvagyan*". Hindi writings are heavily encrusted with Sanskrit. Next comes a homage to Vivekananda. History, it appears from these issues, is nothing but heritage and its writing an act of obeisance. Most articles cover prehistoric or ancient times and archaeology has pride of place, showing where Hindutva's academic strength lies.

They call themselves "scientific" because the articles use footnotes and cite sources: knowing these basics is the source of a pathetic kind of pride since the citations remain vague, the "scientific" lesson not having been fully learnt: one citation references "a large number of articles available on various websites".[86] Very few refer to any historical work published in the last two decades. An exception is a reference to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Calling of History* on Jadunath Sarkar, for reasons discussed

[85] *Itihas Darpan*, Delhi, October 2013.

[86] Mahavir Prasad Jain, "A Brief Survey of the Politics of Indian Historiography", *Itihas Darpan*, April 2016, p. 57.

above.[87] Few of the authors writing these "histories" have academic institutional affiliations. The April 2016 issue, for instance, names six without any at all; four are research scholars, eleven have had some university connection and there are two whose academic status is not mentioned. Preeti Kumar, a contributor, is described as "w/o Mr Sanju Kumar" – whoever he may be. Those with university affiliations come from small North Indian towns – Gorakhpur, Faizabad, Dumka. Not all teach history. Many are associated with very different kinds of institutions that have little to do with historical research or teaching: Makhanlal Chaturvedi National Journalism and Communications University, Bhopal, or Gurukul Kangri.

The articles in English aim at an academic appearance, with glossy and profuse maps and illustrations. Most try to push back dates of various archaeological sites and establish India's influence on other ancient civilisations.[88] They do not attack Islam or Christianity and try sometimes to discuss non-Hindu religious cultures, especially Buddhism, though not Indian Islam or Christianity. The non-combativeness is in sharp contrast to their other historical endeavours discussed earlier. It is possible that the academic serenity adopted has to do with the hope of gaining an international readership, where shrill diatribes have been reckoned as counterproductive. Most Hindi articles, on the other hand, depend on Puranic and Dharmashastric sources, are critical of Western authorities to the point of not using them at all, and bent on proving the incomparable excellence of Hindu sacred art, literature, and laws. An article by Ratnesh Tripathi on Vedic education, for example, extols Brahmanical

[87] Ibid.

[88] T.P. Verma, "Saraswati: The River and the Civilization", *Itihas Darpan*, October 2016.

discipline and celibacy norms for students.[89] Another by Arun Kumar unabashedly proclaims that modern science emanates from the Vedas.[90] Harsh Vardhan Singh Tomar's article is an unsubstantiated and unreferenced eulogy on the uniqueness of Hindu tolerance. The *Manusmriti*, which upholds caste and gender discipline, is presented as a compilation of "useful" social regulations to stem anarchy and disorder. It is supposedly a text that adapts itself wonderfully to changing times – no examples are cited for this – and provides the perfect recipe for our disordered "*bisrinkhal*" times. Vedic sages, who are confused with Manu, apparently desired that all *varna*s must love one another. Complete silence reigns with regard to caste inequality. There is a strenuous attempt to establish continuity between an imagined Saraswati River-based culture and Vedic civilisation to push back the antiquity of the Vedas.[91]

Regardless of English or Hindi, there is a striking absence of articles on medieval and modern times, the exceptions being stinging denunciations of Marxist historians, who are all "anti-national". This blanket denunciation may be a failure of nerve at the RSS being able to mount anything like a serious challenge against the anti-RSS scholarship on colonial times, given that such scholarship is one of the most advanced branches of Indian history writing. Medieval history should be easier terrain for these writers to tackle, since it inevitably involves the usual denigration of Muslim dynasties, but this is not the tone adopted here either, possibly to sustain an image of sober academic propriety. Ethnic pride rather than communal hatred is the rhetorical strategy here.

89 "Vaidic Shiksha Paddhati", *Itihas Darpan,* October 2013.

90 "Param Shiv Ka Shrishti: Vigyan Aur Ved", ibid.

91 *Itihas Darpan*, April 2016, October 2016.

## VIII

Let me end with a few pointers to the areas of strength in Hindutva histories. The concrete content of Hindutva history is simple and thin, the simplicity relieving its votaries of the burden of complex thinking. Yet another important source of strength lies in the fact that RSS historical assumptions are not made in a vacuum; some do plug into frameworks that are otherwise scholarly. A notion of history as combat between good and evil, heroes and demons, for instance, has become fairly standard over time, even in left-nationalist histories, where the heroes are secular-nationalist leaders while the British serve as villains – entirely distant from the conventional RSS demonology, but the overarching binarised patterning of historical understanding shares some structural similarities.

A post-colonial preference for the cultural rather than the political-material also inadvertently creates some space for their brand of cultural nationalism, though with values reversed or overturned in the Hindutva version. Yet in both, to an extent, culture is a static construct, expressing the innate essence of a whole people pitted against the foreign. Dalit histories from the early twentieth century came to offer a critical counter-narrative to cultural organicity, followed by Marxist class-based and feminist frameworks. These threw up serious challenges and alternatives. For all their ritual genuflections to Ambedkar, Hindutva cannot accommodate a serious critical engagement with problems of caste, nor indeed with any kind of internal power lines.[92]

RSS history is driven by political needs, popular beliefs and myths, and constructed memory. Collectively, these assert privilege against investigative history, claiming that "your history" comes

[92] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 30–2.

in the way of "my memory" and relativising all narratives so that the question of academic evaluation and cross-checking, of ascertaining the validity of narrative claims, methods, and purposes does not arise. History becomes a flat field where all kinds of memories have an equally interesting status. Inadvertently, again, some strands of the postmodernist emphasis on challenging the truth claims of empirically verified histories open up some space for this view of history writing.

Given that Hindutva challenges academic historical methods and narratives, why should their accounts of the cultural past become more popular and successful than scholarly ones? Left-secular historians – making up the bulk of Indian historians – have, by and large, a complex and nuanced understanding of history and, needless to say, an immeasurably more scholarly one. Such historians have, with few exceptions, confined their work to the realm of the properly academic and that realm inevitably belongs to metropolitan centres as well as to highly educated middle-class academic circles.[93] Their failure to compete with RSS public histories is often blamed on their "scientific" and secular approach. That, however, is not a correct or fair diagnosis. The flaw actually lies in their circumscribed view of educational dissemination, a focus on national-level textbooks – written by fine minds, no doubt, but in isolation from local, organic social-cultural processes. It is the sheer quantity, continuity, and intensity of the RSS' historical work, the massive cadre base that generates and teaches history at grassroots levels, that makes all the difference. No alternative political or academic formation has ever achieved, or even tried to acquire, their range and depth of dissemination. It is the medium that accounts for the relative success, not the message. And that work produces a history that kills.

[93] Ibid., pp. 1–49.

8

# Hinduism, Hindu Nation, and History

Religious nationalism, in any form or context, must fuse faith and nation into a single indivisible whole. This involves investing faith with a modern political ideology, as well as reconfiguring the nation as an object of ardent religious worship and significantly changing both religion and nationalism in the process. However, the ways in which this double movement is achieved, and the purposes that such a construct serves, differ even within the same country. I will try to identify some critical aspects of the belief structure that Hindu religious nationalism propagates and acts upon in contemporary India.

Thomas Blom Hansen perceptively points out that "Hindu nationalism has indeed successfully recruited and subsumed religious sentiments and public rituals into a larger discourse of national culture . . ." Its actual objectives, however, go far beyond religious purposes, and "are centrally concerned with notions of national honour", stability and global power.[1] Such

[1] Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 177–214.

a transmutation is, indeed, the first step in Hindu nationalist strategy. But the ideology is so deeply mortgaged to religious symbolism, emotionalism, and vocabulary that faith and politics actually circle each other endlessly, their distinctions blurring after a point.

Faith and nationalism may, in any case, share certain generic affinities. Opinions differ on what belief and ritual do for believers. Max Weber said that while early religious systems offered meanings for a largely incomprehensible world and its mysterious ways, the bureaucratic state and modern science have made those functions largely redundant, leading to a general decline in faith.[2] Others contest Weber's thesis of a disenchanted and faithless world, arguing that even in fully modernised countries faith has not really waned; rather, it has sought out fresh pastures. Indian modernity, for instance, is thinly secularised at both state and social levels, so the work of religion remains paramount and relevant, though in an altered form.[3] I argue that for growing numbers of contemporary Hindus, religious nationalism has come to interpret the world they inhabit. It has usurped, in other words, some of the functions that traditional faith performed – albeit, in the name of faith itself.

We may trace its roots in the rapid growth of cultural nationalism from the late nineteenth century. In colonised India, cultural nationalism, both Hindu and Muslim, sought to insulate faith and ritual from an early-nineteenth-century cosmopolitan liberal culture which had stimulated a measure of self-reflexivity and

[2] Sam Whimster, ed., *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

[3] For the limited spheres of secularisation in India, see Achin Vanaik, *Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities*, Delhi: Tulika Books, 2017, chapter 2.

self-reform in society and faith. Cultural nationalism insisted, by contrast, that religious norms should be preserved intact in order to maintain selfhood and identity against colonial cultural onslaughts. This required, more than ever before, an absolute faith in one's own culture and an absolute conviction in the inferiority of others: self-pride and hatred, mingling in equal measure.[4]

Inevitably, this also implied an unequivocal defence of traditional caste and gender inequalities which are embedded in holy texts. After decolonisation, however, as India entered an era of democratic politics with full adult suffrage, defending them openly became risky, given the new need to strike roots in mass political constituencies that now included women and "low castes" in large numbers. That forced a subtle doublespeak and convoluted discursive strategies into later Hindu nationalism.

From the early twentieth century, moreover, a parallel and powerful ideological sphere had developed – that of anti-colonial political nationalism with its liberal vision of a sovereign nation freed by popular resistance from colonial tutelage. Its immense emotional power, nonetheless, drew much from a strikingly religious appeal, whether for Gandhian nationalism or for the Muslim League's Pakistan demand. From its birth, then, Indian political nationalism remained somewhat tied to matters of faith, much as cultural nationalism had been, though with vastly different aims and methods. Hindutva religious nationalism, on the other hand, never shared this history of anti-colonial movements, nor its relatively liberal and inclusive politics. Instead, it took the theme of foreign conquest and Indian resistance into an imagined

[4] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, Delhi and Bloomington: Permanent Black and Indiana University Press, 2001.

medieval past where all Hindus were apparently enslaved by always tyrannical Muslim rulers. So, despite a common appeal to faith, anti-colonial nationalist politics and Hindu religious nationalism had fundamental mutual differences.

Yet all nationalisms possess certain characteristics that closely resemble faith. They work not so much as parallel but as overlapping, symbiotic fields. Often cast as a religious duty, nationalism – whether cultural or political – binds disparate peoples and places through the imaginary of the homogeneous time and space of the affective nation. Both borrow terms from religious morality like Good and Evil, struggle and sacrifice: be it for decolonised India, for Ram Rajya, or for Pakistan.[5] With rare exceptions,[6] the nationalist community imagines the nation as perennial, organic, based on a singular ethnic substance, and as perpetually threatened by its Other/s. These various imaginaries are not identical but they share strong affinities. In several ways, then, the nationalist community resembles the community of faith.[7]

[5] In the early twentieth century, Gandhi, soon to emerge as undisputed leader of anti-colonial mass movements, inspired Hindus with a vision of independent India which would recover the glorious reign of Ram, a divine incarnation and epic hero. In 1940, M.A. Jinnah demanded the separation of Muslim-majority parts of the country to constitute Pakistan, or the Muslim Holy Land.

[6] Jawaharlal Nehru used a more modern secular-democratic vocabulary to describe the nation: without, however, developing a critique of religious nationalism, unless it turned violent. Far more radical imaginaries came from Dalit or untouchable caste leaders like B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar), who produced systematic critiques of the Hindu faith and preached either atheism or rational Buddhism.

[7] Gandhi imagined an inclusive nation and, indeed, was assassinated in 1948 by the Hindutva fanatic Nathuram Godse for his commitment to that ideal. Yet his vocabulary and religious understanding were anchored in

Nationalism, like faith, also shows a way out of the human predicament of finite time and mortality by positing an image of the everlasting national soul which renders the mortal individual deathless – just as faith promises the devout an immortal soul and eternal salvation.[8] Civic or exclusively political nationalism, therefore, found relatively little purchase in modern India, and nationalism and faith did not bifurcate completely. This created a particularly hospitable space for Hindu religious nationalism in our time.

I briefly discuss how Hindutva slides new imperatives into Hindu sectarian, mythological, theological, and ritual preoccupations. Then I try to show how Hindutva historical narratives enable the process.

The entire exercise has been done, most remarkably, without any visible disturbance of familiar religious beliefs and practices, but with very delicate and insidious manipulation. It has

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Brahmanical social ideology and theological texts like the Gita. See Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, op. cit. See also Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, pp. 94–9.

[8] For elaborations of these views of nationalism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1961; Steven Grosby, *Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalisms*, London: Routledge, 1998; Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992; Anthony D. Smith, *A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalisms*, London: Routledge, 1998; John Breuilly, "Approaches to Nationalism", in G. Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation*, London: Verso, 1996; Charles Taylor, "Nationalism and Modernity", in Ronald Beiner, ed., *Theorizing Nationalism*, New York: SUNY Press, 1999, among others.

produced a most powerful Hindu common sense – that the Indian nation is quintessentially Hindu, and that the sacred geography of the nation as well as all its holy figures and sites have been mortally endangered by Muslims and Christians throughout history. Be it "love jihad", or cow vigilantism, the Ramjanmbhoomi temple, or anti-conversion agitations – the four perennials in their mass contact programmes – Hindutva has largely redefined worship as vengeance. I should also add that they have successfully constructed the motif of a supposed Muslim infiltration across the borders from Bangladesh and Pakistan, from which follows the BJP's electoral agenda of inviting Hindus resident in other countries to return to India as full citizens. Bringing enormous electoral dividends, the agenda of reducing Muslim numbers and adding to Hindu ones is a major step in achieving Hindu Rashtra, the holy land for Hindus of the Hindutva persuasion.

Hindutva's religious manoeuvres have not received the attention they deserve. Important though the mantra of development has been, the RSS claim to represent and protect both Hindu community and Hindu nation has had an equally powerful and even more enduring grip over popular emotion, before and after 2014.[9] It is quite clear that this conviction is not going to disappear in the near future.[10]

[9] At the ongoing BJP national meet on 11 January 2019, the resolution that drew the loudest cheers was the one about the Ram Mandir. NDTV 24/7, 12 January 2018.

[10] In 2016, the RSS possessed thirty-six affiliates, each with numerous sub-affiliates. It ran nearly 57,000 daily *shakha*s (branches; training centres), the largest chain of non-government schools in the country, and branches among women, students, teachers, trade unions, media and social media, the army, temples, leisure and culture centres, charitable organisations, tribals,

## II

Hindutva has a multiplex discursive structure. An inner core is composed of the entire and varied world of Hindu ritual, of cultic and sectarian beliefs, practices, and institutions. Hindutva leaves them fairly intact, even though some significant innovations are quietly and insidiously slipped in to recast their original meanings. Recently, the West Bengal BJP celebrated the Ram Navami and Ganesh Chaturthi festivals on a massive scale, even though they have never been a part of the traditional festive calendar in the region. These were intended to draw Bengalis into the North Indian pattern of worship. In the same measure, the Delhi BJP has begun to observe Chhat Puja, so far restricted to Bihar and Biharis. Such activities are a two-way effort to create a trans-regional community of worshippers by dissolving regional religious specificities. Overarching the domain of traditional everyday religion, however, a new goddess of the nation – Bharatmata – now presides over the reordered Hindu theogony. She is a goddess without mythological antecedents, having been born in a late-nineteenth-century Bengali novel to serve a specific historical mission – that of eliminating Muslim rule in Bengal.[11] Towering temples have been dedicated to her in the last few decades in most Indian pilgrimage sites.

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slum-dwellers, and other social groups. It bites deep into the everyday of all kinds of people and its grassroots activism is steadily growing.

[11] *Anandamath*, the late-nineteenth-century Bengali historical novel by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (the subject of chapter 1, above) first invented the goddess. She comes to command her children to destroy Muslim rule, kill Muslims, and demolish their mosques. The hymn to her is sung every day at RSS *shakhas* and Hindu nationalists have since then tried to replace the Indian national anthem with it.

In the novel, she calls out for the blood of Muslims. The novel also includes the hymn to her – Bande Mataram – which has been the source of a great deal of recent Hindutva communal mobilisation.[12] The song – routinely sung at all RSS shakhas – serves three distinct functions. Because it is dedicated to a Hindu goddess, such a personification and deification of the country has never been acceptable to Muslims and Christians. Hindutva projects their religious reluctance to worship her as an irrefutable sign of their hatred for Bharat, as the sign of their innate anti-nationalism. Second, the goddess soon becomes a symbol in the song and in the novel, and passes the mantle of divine intervention to the community of Hindus, thereby reversing the conventional relationship between deity and devotee.

Hindutva's master stroke for mass mobilisation – the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign of the early 1990s – is a classic example of how the moral devotee becomes the saviour of the immortals. Ramlalla, the holy infant, they say, was made homeless by a sixteenth-century Muslim emperor who destroyed his birthplace. Ram now depends on contemporary Hindus to recover his home.

[12] In colonial times, it was used both as a nationalist slogan and as a war cry against Muslims. There was some talk about making it the national anthem in the 1930s but Nehru, on Tagore's advice, rejected the proposal because of its communalised context. The first stanza – which simply praises the Indian land mass without any militaristic resonances – has been kept as the "national song". The RSS has long demanded that it should replace the existing national anthem. The previous BJP government in Madhya Pradesh made its singing mandatory at the state secretariat. The recently installed Congress government first tried to do away with the practice but, faced with charges of anti-nationalism, reversed its stand and reinstated its performance on an even grander scale. See Suanshu Khurana, "Whose Song Is It, Anyway?", *Indian Express,* Delhi, Monday, 7 January 2019.

This is a striking redistribution of vulnerability and strength between divine and human.

Endowing the country with a sensuous female sacred form has performed a third function in post-Partition times. Golwalkar called Partition "the rape" of the divine mother, the dismemberment and devastation of the holiest of bodies. A negotiated territorial division and the political emergence of two separate nation-states thus becomes a religious sin, and a sin of the highest order. RSS institutions restore her physical integrity. They display the map of Akhand Bharat as the true Indian map. It includes, strangely, Afghanistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka as well as Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The RSS prides itself on its religious liberalism.[13] But if we look closer, we find that the openness is restricted to Hindu religious diversity.[14] The internal liberalism has a peculiar effect which goes largely unnoticed. Hinduism has always been a contested religious world divided among many sects, beliefs, practices, and gods. Hindutva's accommodation of all on equal terms actually amounts to a hollowing out of older preoccupations with metaphysical-philosophical-doctrinal as well as sectarian concerns.[15]

In their early work on the RSS, Walter K. Andersen and S.D. Damle placed the RSS within the philosophical tradition of Advaitist monism, or the principle of non-division between

[13] See Tapan Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993, chapter 3.

[14] Ibid., chapter 2.

[15] In 2008–9, I visited RSS bookshops in Delhi and found not a single religious text there, either in Sanskrit or in Hindi. When I asked priests at a VHP temple at Ramakrishnapuram in Delhi about the significance of idols there, and about their mythological referents, they were extremely vague and uncaring.

Creator and Created.[16] No Hindutva leader, though, has ever reflected on monism, not even Golwalkar who briefly joined the Advaita-oriented Ramakrishna Mission. Andersen and Damle offered a most eclectic religious lineage for Hindutva, from the Upanishads to the Gita, and thence to medieval devotional Bhakti streams of thought. They conveniently ignored fundamental rifts or incommensurable incompatibilities among them, between a Gita based on caste-regulated dharma and devotional strands that negate caste, for instance; or between *nirguna* visions of a formless divinity and temple-based *saguna* image worship with the full panoply of Brahman priests and rituals. The overfulness of their religious world is in fact a form of religious emptiness. When I visited VHP temples in Delhi between 2002 and 2008, the priests seemed singularly uninterested in the mythological aspects of their temple deities. They talked, instead, of the Muslim threat to their faith.

Andersen and Damle base their notion of an Advaitist affiliation on Hindutva's evocation of the concept of *chiti*, or a single all-encompassing soul. Hindutva's *chiti*, however, does not indicate a non-divided cosmic soul or universal principle.[17] Golwalkar refers, rather, to a single soul that animates the entire Hindu *nation*: "The same philosophy of life, the same goal, the

[16] W.K. Andersen and S.D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1987. See, for instance, A. Hiltebeitel, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion and Narrative*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, and P. Olivelle, *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Legal History*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 2009, for elaboration of these terms.

[17] The concept was elaborated by Deen Dayal Upadhyay, founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (precursor of the BJP) in his *Integral Humanism*, Delhi: Navchetan Press, 1968, p. 52.

same supremacy of the inner spirit over the outer gross things of matter, the same faith in rebirth, the same adoration of certain qualities like *brahmacharya, satya*, etc., the same holy *samskaras*, in short, the same life blood flowed through all the limbs of our society."[18] So, *chiti* actually implies a this-worldly monolithic social organisation which is also always the nation. Golwalkar goes on to say that sages should interpret laws and act as custodians of the "national soul".[19] The Hindu sages were the expounders of Brahmanical texts. Implicitly, then, this acknowledges the monopoly of Brahmans over sacred truth. The privileging of *samskaras* is the privileging of Hindu life-cycle rites based on iniquitous caste and gender values.[20]

What this accommodation of all devotional traditions means, in practice, is the continued dominance of Brahmanical injunctions. There are occasional – and very gestural or tactical – compromises with anti-caste rhetoric. The BJP takes great care to pay

[18] M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts,* 1966; rpnt Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashan, 2017, p. 102. Golwalkar here outlines the unique Hindu philosophy of the cycle of rebirths wherein one's station in this life is decided by the nature of her actions in a past birth, which will in turn decide her situation in her next birth. The principle has always been a theodicy explaining caste inequality. It is necessary to note that the concept of rebirth is integrally connected with caste. *Brahmacharya, satya*: purity and truth, both associated with Brahmanical virtue; *samskaras*: a ritual order focused on essential life-cycle rites.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Tossing away its stress on a modernising self-image, the BJP has recently organised a violent campaign in defiance of a Supreme Court order which cleared the way for the entry of women of menstruating age into the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala, an entry that is ritually prohibited. When push comes to shove, therefore, the identification with Brahmanical ritualism reigns supreme.

formal obeisance to Ambedkar. But Ambedkar is honoured as the author of the Indian constitution while being ignored as the fiercest critic of caste, as the anti-caste hero of those rendered "untouchable" by Hinduism who argued that the ground practices of Hinduism were virtually synonymous with the practise of caste. The RSS has neither initiated nor joined anti-caste agitations, whatever the purity–pollution practices of individual members may be. Nor has it undertaken projects for structural change in the material-cultural bases of caste. The few ameliorative measures for fostering Dalit-owned small businesses have not been attended to with much seriousness by BJP state governments, and overall the organisation is recognised as having tried to dilute, rather than enforce, legal safeguards against anti-Dalit atrocities.[21] Up to the time of Golwalkar, a rigidly Brahmanical discourse on caste was unabashedly used, till post-Independence electoral necessities came to require a softer tone.[22]

Golwalkar was admirably frank. Caste, as a social system, is essential to Hinduism, sanctified as it is by the Gita, the most sacred of texts; so are prescribed duties and functions, which must remain hereditary; we still need caste because history shows us that it never led to disunity – unity, not social justice, being the paramount consideration for the validation of caste. These days, however, Golwalkar said, "anti-caste zealots", who suffer from a

[21] See Sukhadeo Thorat, "Dalits in Post-2014 India: Between Promise and Action", in Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot, eds, *The Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2019.

[22] Tanika Sarkar, "Problems of Social Power and the Discourses of the Hindu Right", in Mary Katzenstein and Raka Ray, eds, *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power and Politics*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, reproduced as chapter 5 above.

lack of commitment to national unity, condemn the sacred caste order in order to serve their narrow self-interest. They flock to peck at caste, like crows on a piece of flesh.[23] This is a reference, obviously, to Ambedkar, the best-known critic of caste; however, he immediately mentions Dravidian misguided cultural separatism as well, so he clearly had Periyar in mind as well. In short, what I termed the "inner core" nests a deeper one: orthodox caste and gender regulations. Recent Sabarimala Temple events in Kerala made the latter very clear. They also made it very clear that such caste and gender ideologies are not entirely restricted to the BJP but encompass a broader political spectrum.

"We want a 'living' God" said Golwalkar, and the Nation was that God.[24] By redefining India as the Hindu Rashtra, the Sangh has already erased the distinction between nation and community. The Nation-God of Hindutva is, therefore, the community or the society of Hindus. RSS history writing supplies its mythology.

In 1964 the RSS chose to develop a specifically ecclesiastical wing – the Vishwa Hindu Parishad – to bring Hindu religious institutions, ascetics, monastic sects, priests, and temples under its wing. It also included Sikhs, who are regarded as allies and religious partners. In 2008, I found that the Delhi Ramakrishnapuram VHP temple had developed a common festival calendar for Hindu temples, local gurdwaras, the Arya Samaj (which formally abjures image worship), and Sanatanist temples (which worship images). It is not a bland unification, though, since it is the erstwhile monotheist Arya Samaj which has been pulled into Ram and Hanuman worship and temple-based festivals, and not the other way around. Inclusiveness, thus, ends up with an

[23] Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, op. cit., pp. 40, 107–10.

[24] Ibid., p. 29.

insidious return to the *saguna* principle which requires temple-based worship with Brahman priests and elaborate rituals. It is a form of incorporation. The same is done with tribal deities through a process of affinity-building with Hindu ones and then overwriting their separate lives.

The primary aim of Hindutva's Hinduism is not just to unify Hindus but to do so under a violent agenda against non-Hindus. Swami Chinmayananda, an ascetic with global credentials and founder of the VHP along with RSS' S.S. Apte, came up with elaborate plans for counter-conversions of Christians to Hinduism. At its first World Hindu Conference in the pilgrimage city of Allahabad in 1966, 25,000 delegates from as many sects were brought together under its overarching rubric. Even the Ramakrishna Mission, a highly respected global Advaitist monastic organisation famed for philanthropic and intellectual activities – and not in the least associated with any form of mob violence – co-operated with VHP projects in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh in the north-east.[25] Its youth wing, the Bajrang Dal, stokes violent conflicts against Muslims and Christians across India. The Durga Vahini front for young women exercises surveillance against courting couples.[26] The VHP scours marriage registration offices to check on impending inter-community marriages and then moves to block them.[27] From the outset, then,

[25] John Thomas, "From Sacred Rocks to Temple: Recasting Religion as Identity in North Eastern India", unpublished article; also Pralay Kanungo, "Fusing the Ideals of the Math with the Ideology of the Sangh", in J. Zavos, *et al.*, eds, *Public Hinduisms*, op. cit., pp 134–7.

[26] Tanika Sarkar, "Is Love Without Borders Possible?", in *Feminist Review, Gender, Violence and the Neo Liberal State in India,* no. 119, 2018 (guest editors: Kalpana Wilson, Jennifer Ung Loh, and Navtej Purewal).

[27] See the actual footage of camp activities in Nisha Paheja's *The World Before Her.*

the VHP's religion has been combative and confrontational. Interestingly, female ascetics have been star mobilisers: Saddhvi Rithambhara, Saddhvi Prachi, Saddhvi Pragya.[28] Saddhi Rithambhara, a VHP ascetic, issued a clarion call to violence against Muslims: *Khoon Kharaba Hona Hai to Ekbaar Ho Jaane Do.* (If blood needs to be shed, let it be shed now.) Her speech was played from temple loudspeakers when all else failed to instigate riots in places reputed for communal harmony.

In fact, temples and priests, as well as the Shankaracharya of the major Kanchi Math, have been pulled into the VHP's violent campaigns – gaining, in the process, a pan-Indian visibility and critical political role that they never enjoyed so far. Shortly after the VHP emerged, ascetics started a riot in Delhi in 1966 demanding a blanket ban on cow slaughter. Temples have played recorded simulated riot sounds between 1990 and 1992 with Hindu female voices apparently crying out for help against Muslim attacks. In 2002, shortly after the huge anti-Muslim carnage in Gujarat, I saw a Delhi temple in Greater Kailash II advertising "self-defence" combat training for Hindu youths. The largest chain of temples in North India – Sanatan Dharam temples – proclaim their allegiance to the Sangh Parivar and applaud VHP campaigns against Muslims and Christians.[29] The Bajrang Dal meets every Tuesday in Hanuman temples where tridents were distributed six months before the Gujarat carnage. The collusion of temples in violence is quite explicit. The VHP organises annual conclaves of ascetics and sect leaders – Dharam Sansads and Sadhu Sammelans – who formally bless its violent projects.

[28] "Aspects of Contemporary Hindutva Ideology: The Voice of Sadhvi Rithambhara", in Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, op. cit.

[29] Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts*, op. cit.

The VHP also infiltrates everyday household practices, training domestic priests and providing a minimum code of conduct for all Hindus: sun worship twice a day; making the traditional auspicious Om symbol highly visible and ubiquitous in public places, among households, and on personal wear; daily worship of the central sacred text Gita for every Hindu household, and of the sacred *tulsi* plant; frequent pilgrimages and a domestic shrine in each home.[30] It runs neighbourhood *bhajan mandalis* (congregational singing of devotional songs), and even yoga training centres where teachers reinterpret national and local news at the end of the programmes. By recombining traditional Hindu ritual practices in a slightly different order, it plugs into the comfort zone of familiar devotionalism. At the same time, it leaves its own indelible footprint all over this world: via small icons such as pictures of the forthcoming Ram temple, of the infant Ram and the warrior Ram, of Hindu warriors who fought against Muslim rulers.[31]

The RSS observes six annual religious-nationalistic festivals: Navaratri-Vijaya Dashami in autumn when Ram was enthroned; Makar Sankranti in January to celebrate "integral nationalism"; Varsh Pratipada in April when Yudhisthira, an epic monarch, and King Vikramaditya are reputed to have inaugurated the Hindu calendar; Hindu Samrajya Diwas to celebrate the sixteenth-century Maratha warrior hero Shivaji; Rakshabandhan in August to remind the RSS of its duty to sacrifice life and protect the honour of Hindu society; Vyas Puja, in September, when the RSS saffron flag is worshipped and donations are collected.[32] Three

[30] Jaffrelot, "Vishwa Hindu Parishad", op. cit.

[31] Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts*, chapter 3.

[32] Jaffrelot, "Vishwa Hindu Parishad", op. cit., Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts*, op. cit.: Aastha Tyagi, "Sadhana Karte Chalein", unpublished M.Phil.

of the above are traditional festivals, now re-purposed. Two are RSS inventions with an explicitly communal agenda and the last is a practical funds drive now given a holy name.

This curious amalgam of the religious, the ritualistic, and the political-communal actually represents the reconstituted Hindu world in the microcosm of public religious festivals. At the same time, it is clear that when push comes to shove the primary identification is with Brahmanical ritualism and its caste and gender components. That is the innermost core, the heart of the matter for Hindutva.

## III

History replaces – or becomes – religious doctrine by first erasing the gap between mythological time and historical time. Savarkar called "the Prince of Ayodhya" the founder of the Hindu nation. The epic king thus becomes a historical figure and a nationalist hero. The Ramjanmabhoomi movement, as noted, quietly created a new Ramayana. Ram is at war not with the demon king but with a Muslim one. Muslims, past and present, thereby take the place of epic demons. The Muslim terrorist, global and Indian, segues smoothly into the figures of Babur, Aurangzeb, and so-called love jihadists. All stand in for one another, each contains all others. In the same measure, temporal sequence loses its linearity and there are easy passages to and fro between past, present, and future. Time moves backwards and forwards simultaneously.

V.D. Savarkar single-handedly created and perfected the RSS

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dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Delhi, 2016. Shubh Mathur, *The Everyday Life of Hindu Nationalism: An Ethnographic Account*, Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2008, pp. 1–49.

version of history. He also perfected a particular rhetorical and logical manoeuvre. By first delinking his concept of Hindutva from faith and making it stand for the national cultural essence, and then quietly filling up the national territory with Hindu religious signs, he created a distinctive brand of Hindu religious nationalism. In his seminal tract of 1923, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, Savarkar described India as the land of holy rivers and mountains mentioned in ancient Hindu holy texts. Dotted with Hindu pilgrimages, India is territory made sacred through its association with Hindu cosmogony and mythology. India, he said belongs to those Indians whose religions originated within this land, thus tying territory and belief with a double knot. Indian Christians and Muslims are not truly Indians, however long their ancestors may have lived in the Hindu holy land.

*Hindutva* was written at a time when southern and western India were rocked by "lower-caste" protests and challenges to Brahmanical power. Savarkar *had* to refer to caste divisions among Hindus. He claimed that such divisions have long been superseded by miscegenation and the mixing of blood among castes. All Hindus, high and low, share primeval family ties based on common blood. "No people in the world can more justly claim to get recognised as a racial unit than the Hindus and perhaps the Jews."[33]

But even the metaphor of blood was not enough to procure Hindu unity. So he invoked the Muslim. "Nothing makes the self conscious of itself so much as a conflict with non-self. Nothing can weld people into a nation and nations into a state as the pressure of a common foe. Hatred separates as well as unites."[34]

[33] Savarkar, *Hindutva*, op. cit.

[34] Ibid., cited in C. Jaffrelot, ed., *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007, pp. 91–2.

A Hindu nation that wants to mask power lines internal to Hindu society needs an external threat to actualise unity. Hatred is in this respect foundational to nationhood. In the same measure, in the very act of invoking and then immediately dissolving the spectre of caste, Savarkar actually provided both a cover and a subtle justification for it.

A rich harvest of "historical memories" of Muslim aggression became the starting point of Indian history. Hindu violence in the present, however spectacular, is always necessary retaliation, essential survival strategy. Having constructed the Muslim as the most odious and hideous figure, Savarkar then advised the Hindu to recast himself in the imagined enemy's image. He believed Shivaji should have assaulted captive Muslim queens.

Savarkar's notion of perennial and exuberant Muslim lust for Hindu women provides, down to this day, pretexts for vicious attacks on Muslims who are suspected of seducing Hindu women, to convert and marry them, and then to traffic them to Islamic countries such as Pakistan. Inter-community love and marriage are now renamed "love jihad" planned by Muslim terrorists, love being a Muslim ruse for political conspiracy.[35] Ultimately, the broader aim is to police love itself, unless sanctified by marriage within caste and community boundaries and family decision. It is the first step needed to produce docile Hindu citizens.

Over the years, this history has come to function as authentic Hindu personal memory as well as genuine knowledge. It is not only dominant but hegemonic. Its power lies more in the ways in which it is taught than in what it says.

[35] Neha Dixit, "Love Jihad: War on Romance in India", Al-Jazeera, 14 October 2014: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014.

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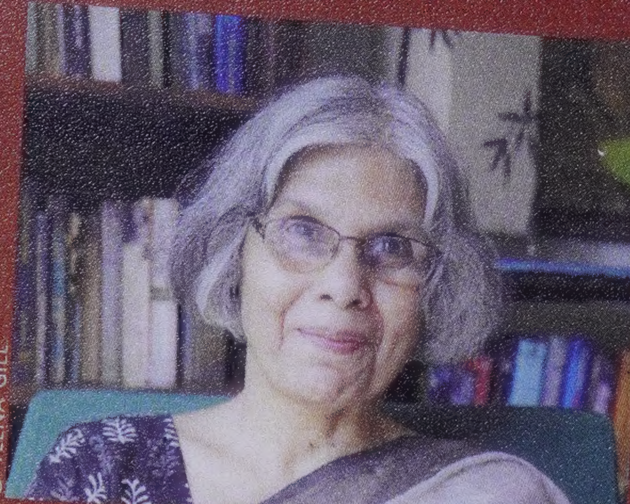
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"Hinduism, Hindu Nation, and History" appears in print here for the first time.

# Index

Recommended by Prof. Dr. Arun K. Thiruvengadam



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TANIKA SARKAR'S books include *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2001), and *Rebels, Wives, Saints* (2009). She was Professor of History at Jawaharlal Nehru University and has taught at the University of Chicago, the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and St Stephen's College, Delhi.

Over the past twenty years or so, there has been a seismic shift in Inc political, religious, and social life. A country which drew inspiration fror the inclusive Hinduism of Mahatma Gandhi, the anti-caste worldview of B.R. Ambedkar, and the agnostic secularism of Jawaharlal Nehru is nov driven by Hindutva.

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She has trawled through papers, posters, and iconography in its organisations and institutions. She has been to the offices and homes of its votaries, interviewing men and women who believe fervently in a Hinduised India. And she has contextualised this new social ferment with her archival knowledge of Hindutva from Bankimchandra to the Babri mosque and beyond.

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